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The

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Aunt Stelly

From a novel

From the top of the stairs, looking down the long hall, Attis Cliabourne could already see Aunt Stelly clearly. She was alone now in her room, sitting in her tall bed with her hands folded in a small pile and her knobby fingers locked together and twisted loosely in front of her. She looked worse than he had expected. Even from a distance, her skin seemed slightly damp and viscous and her face and hands had a stale, partly green and iridescent hue. She actually looked more organic than alive; she didn't even seem to be breathing. Attis walked slowly down the hall and hesitated, nearly stopped, at the door; but Aunt Stelly nodded once and he came in quietly.

"Do you know what I was just thinking?" Aunt Stelly said, easing herself up higher in the bed and placing her thin arms on the mattress, bracing herself carefully and continuing in the same breath (because there was no answer), "As you were coming up the stairs, Attis, I was thinking I ought to get you to promise me you will die. I take immense comfort in knowing everybody will die."

She smiled nervously but only briefly and Attis stopped in the middle of the room. "Ma'am?" he said.

"Don't ask ma'am. Just promise me. Quick. Do you promise? Hurry. Promise me Attis."

"I promise," Attis said vaguely.

"Cross your heart?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Go back and shut the door then," Aunt Stelly said, sinking quietly back in the bed. "Push it till it clicks."

Attis went back and with his foot slid aside a thick book that was acting as a stop and dragged the heavy oak door across the thick blue rug. He lifted the doorknob slightly and pushed the door shut.

"Did it click?" Aunt Stelly asked.

"Yes ma'am."

"Good," she said. "Hurry. There isn't much time. . . How have you been?"

"Fine."

"Really?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Really and *truly*?"

"Yes," Attis replied, and sat down.

"Humph!" Aunt Stelly said, straining closely to see him. Her eyes looked like two small, slightly grey, slightly bloody marbles embedded in a giant prune. They did not seem to be tracking together. Attis focused on each of them separately and then (almost unconsciously) looked quickly away.

"Tell me Attis," Aunt Stelly said, looking at him closely. "Tell me honey," she repeated carefully (but for no apparent reason), "Do you like pretty girls?"

Her eyes were wider now, and her breath suddenly began to make a hoarse, rasping sound. She sat there waiting.

"Yes ma'am," Attis said.

"I thought so," Aunt Stelly said and propped herself up still higher on her pillow and folded her hands. The rasping sound in her throat disappeared. "Everybody likes pretty girls, don't they?"

"I guess," Attis answered, pretending to look at her closely (though he was actually looking not at, but along her face, sighting just above her withered rightmost ear and out an open window beyond the bed). Aunt Stelly's ear looked like something that might have been torn off an old cabbage.

"I'm afraid you would never have liked me," Aunt Stelly said, "I was never anything remotely like a pretty girl. Never once. . . Never." And she sighed a long, drawn-out and artificial sigh. "It's a good thing I'm eighty-five years old and dying."

"Ma'am?"

"I said it's a good thing I'm eighty fi--"

"Oh," Attis said, and waited. "You know that's not true."

"What's not true?"

"Anything. You're not dying. Nobody has said that you were dying."

"You would never have liked me," Aunt Stelly repeated, and Attis waited again, but then she suddenly twisted her head and closed one eye to look at him. "What are you sitting down for? Who told you to sit down? I can't see you very well."

Attis, who had crossed his legs, uncrossed them and stood up and walked to the foot of the bed.

"That's better," Aunt Stelly said. "Here. Look at this." She eased her arms out of the heavy quilt and picked up a cool lump of skin from the loose folds near her elbow and pulled it up then dropped it again like it was some sort of pale cooking dough. "You know what that is?" she asked, looking at him sharply, "Do you?"

Attis oscillated his head, but in no definite direction.

"That's me," Aunt Stelly said. "Can you believe that? Can you? I . . . Well I can't believe it at all. This . . . *here* (She jiggled the skin) is *me*. I was never pretty, but I wasn't like this. I was never gooey before."

She closed her eyes.

Attis, at the end of the bed, felt vaguely embarrassed. He put his hands on a wooden rail that braced the posts but said nothing. He waited silently, and Aunt Stelly soon continued. "Have you decided to really look at me yet?" she asked, smiling once again nervously. "Sometimes I think I can see you better with my eyes closed. Sometimes I think I . . ." Then she stopped. "Do you believe in witches?"

Attis stood there. "Witches?" he repeated, shifting uneasily, "No ma'am."
"No?"

Attis shook his head.

"I've been thinking about becoming a witch," Aunt Stelly explained. She opened her eyes quickly. "I've been thinking that if I'm a good girl maybe God will let me come back as a witch. What do you think?" She picked up her skin and pulled it tight and dropped it again so that it seemed to puddle on her arm. "Flop," she said, in a light dry voice. "Why is it that you don't believe in witches?"

"I . . ." Attis said. "I don't know. I never much *thought*. . ."

"You really ought to believe in witches, Attis. I'm serious. You really ought. There is so much time. There's more than enough time to believe in everything." She looked around the room in a slow, preoccupied manner and seemed, for a moment, to be counting the objects in it. She nervously pinched up a fold of the quilt, then smoothed it again with her hand. "Aren't you glad you aren't dying?"

"You aren't *dying*," Attis said impatiently. "You're just sick."

"Do you see anything in the room you would like when I'm dead? Anything at all? . . . Any . . . I'm sorry to have to rush so. Huh? Answer me Attis."

"No ma'am."

"What?"

"I don't want anything."

"You don't *what*? Look *around* Attis."

"I don't *want* anything. What kind of a question is that?"

"It's a very good question," Aunt Stelly said. "What's wrong with it? Everything in this room is much nicer than anything in your house. Go *on*, honey."

Attis turned and stared dutifully at the blue pastel wall behind him. He could see a huge gilded mirror and the reflection of Aunt Stelly watching him carefully from her tall bed. Looking beyond that, he saw a marble-topped dresser and a cut-glass vase, and farther, near the far corner, a wide oil painting of a group of dark flowers. Just below the painting was a cane-bottomed rocker that seemed to be stuck or slowly sinking into the thick blue rug; and then, on a deep shelf in that same corner (and this he saw for the first time), a small hand-cranked music box with a pile of changeable

metal discs.

"Isn't it, Attis?"

"Ma'am?"

"This room is nicer, isn't it?"

"Yes ma'am."

Attis was still looking at the music box.

"You've got a perfectly terrible house," Aunt Stelly said. "Your grandfather had no taste whatsoever. He bought the most expensive trash. Your house is full of trash. Your house is horrible. Don't you think it's horrible?"

"I guess," Attis said distantly.

"Don't guess. Take my word. It's absolutely . . . It's."

She raised her hand quickly and slapped it over her mouth.

"Oh Attis, that was a *terrible* thing to say. I'm sorry. I really am. I've been ornery to *everybody* today. I'm never ornery, ever . . . I don't have a reputation for being ornery or disagreeable, do I?"

"No ma'am."

"Of course I don't. I'm really sorry. You mustn't listen to me at all."

Attis glanced briefly back at the music box.

"What do. . ." Aunt Stelly said, and stopped. "Oh nevermind. I was just certain you would ask for the music box. You're not as stingy as I thought, Attis. But *somebody* ought to take it. It must be worth a thousand dollars. Maybe Elwood will want it. Listen, do you think. . . What I really wanted to ask is do you think you could possibly take care of my turtle, you know, Elmer. He—"

"No ma'am," Attis answered, completely absentmindedly.

"What?"

"Oh," he said. "No. . . That is. What I mean is, you're not *dying*. There's—"

"Don't tell me what I'm not doing. Would you take care of Elmer? Do you know anything about turtles? Do you think that dog of yours, what's his name? . . . Ralph. Ralph. Do you think *Ralph* will bother him?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. He'd probably be OK."

"Who, Elmer? It's not *Elmer* that I'm *worried* about, honey. I'm warning you, don't let Ralph bother him, and don't you bother him either. I'm serious. Elmer would bite every one of your fingers off if you gave him half a chance." Aunt Stelly was looking, absent-mindedly, at her arm as she talked, and now, with her fingers, she carefully stretched out some of the wrinkles in her forearm and held the skin taut. "I didn't realize he would be like that when I got him. Actually, for some reason I thought he was a girl when I got him. I really did. Can you believe that? I had to change his name. I kept waiting and waiting for him to lay eggs. . ." She looked up. "Elmer doesn't

lay eggs," she said. "I guess you know that?"

Attis nodded.

"You do?"

"Yes."

Aunt Stelly stared at her arm again, and the smooth-stretched skin. "Of course you do. Children know everything nowadays. Anyway, I'm sure Elmer could take care of Ralph. You'd better talk to that dog."

"Yes ma'am."

"Feed Elmer at least twice a week and explain to Ralph what a turtle is before he finds out for himself."

"Yes ma'am."

Attis waited, but Aunt Stelly didn't add anymore; and while he watched she seemed to forget about him entirely. He tried to put the music box completely out of his mind, and tried to arrange his thoughts so they would be presentable if someone were monitoring them somewhere. He wondered distantly, and almost politely, if Aunt Stelly had any sort of terror of dying, or if he was supposed to say something. Her eyes might have been ball bearings from as much as he could read in them. But as he watched, Aunt Stelly suddenly and without making a sound raised her right hand on its fingertips and made it walk, as if it were some large insect, all the way to the edge of the bed, then wheeled it around and made it walk back, very slowly, in an excessively articulate and knobby sort of motion. She walked it across the tufted pattern of the quilt and gradually up onto the tufted lump that was her stomach.

She stopped her hand on the top of her stomach.

"All my life, Attis," Aunt Stelly said suddenly, "all my life I have ministered to various selfish and irresponsible children; and because I was single, and because I was ugly. . . I was a very ugly girl Attis. . . There was always something subtly comic in it."

She said this simply, but at the same time with a certain amount of pride. She twiddled two of her fingers, like antennae, and turned them, still perched on her stomach, very slightly so that the little insect they made faced her now. "Comic for them, that is. . . Do you understand?"

"No one ever thought that," Attis said.

"Nonsense," she said. "Everyone thought that. I thought that myself. I was just a steward for God's beautiful children." She looked up quickly and caught Attis staring at her hand. "Ummm?" she said. "Speak up. What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything."

"It's true," she said. "It's *soo*. . ." She paused. "Well of course it's not true. Don't pay any attention to me."

"Don't get depressed, Aunt Stelly. You'll be around five years from now

and you know it."

"Will I?" she said. "Tell me, do I really make you that uncomfortable? Do I really?" Aunt Stelly looked at her hand, then suddenly let it collapse into a pile of fingers again. "I should lie down and die like a good girl, shouldn't I?" she said, brushing her stomach. "We'll have to find something else to talk about, won't we? Something to make Attis comfortable. What could we possibly talk about that would make you comfortable?" She twisted her face in a mock attitude of serious thinking. "There isn't much, is there?" Then she relaxed her face. "How do you like your picture, honey?"

Attis looked at her.

Aunt Stelly smiled.

Attis suddenly knew what she was talking about but still answered (uncomfortably). "What picture?"

"Oh come on. You know. The *picture*, dammit."

"The one in the front bedroom?"

"Yes. Yes. The one in the front bedroom. The one I gave you. The one of *Jesus*, for Christ's sake. Does that make you uncomfortable too? Are you trying to act sophisticated? You're not old enough to act sophisticated, Attis. Do you like it? Huh? Does the family like it?"

"Yes."

"Is that the truth?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Where do yawl keep it when I'm not visiting?"

"Ma'am?"

"Where do you *keep* it, son? A closet? The cellar? Boy are you evasive. I know you don't keep it on the *wall*, honey. I'm not that dumb. Speak up. And don't lie to me. You've already lied to me twice."

"We. . ." Attis said, and stood there. He couldn't think. He couldn't think of anything. Finally he continued slowly, but honestly. "We keep it in the attic."

"Oh," Aunt Stelly said. "Well I won't be visiting anymore. You can throw it away."

"Ma'am?"

"You heard me."

"Ma'am?"

"I said you can throw it *away*! Listen to me. And don't say ma'am, dammit. Ma'am is all you ever *say*, Attis."

She leaned forward quickly in bed.

"I can't understand why it is that everybody thinks you are so smart. I never *have* understood. I'd rather talk to a mirror than to you. I'm serious. You have managed to elevate politeness to a *philosophy*. . . or something like that. Evasiveness maybe. I don't know what you've done. For the life of me

son, I really. . . I don't happen to think you're very smart, Attis."

She leaned over to a nightstand beside the bed near the window and began fumbling around on a tray beneath it. "Oh *nevermind*," she said. "Do you know what kitsch is?"

Attis (who had no idea what it meant) stood there angrily, staying very deliberately and obnoxiously silent. He closed his fingers tightly and cracked the knuckle of his thumb.

"Good," she said and picked up from the tray of the nightstand one of three carved wooden blotters with monkeys on them. "I thought I might as well keep up the tradition," she explained. "This is what you might call moral kitsch. Or so I've been told, and you know I always listen to what people tell me." She rolled back in the bed and faced him. "Aren't they cute?" she added grimly.

She handed him the blotter.

Attis took it and turned it around and looked at the three carved cedar monkeys and solemnly read the slogan (Monkey Hear no, See no, Speak no evil) and read also, beneath that, a glossy inscription that said, Great Smokey Mountains National Park. There was a five-dollar bill attached to the monkeys by a rubber band.

"Thank you," Attis said.

"For what?"

"The blotter."

"Oh," she said. "Well, you're welcome. Just try to take care of Elmer, OK? Would you *please* try to take care of Elmer. . ."

"I'll take care of him."

"You see, Attis," she continued, "we stewards. . . We stewards play our little games. It's not exactly sacrilegious. . . About the picture, that is. I am a supremely religious person, as you well know."

Attis nodded.

"I don't care whether you know it or not," she answered quickly. "I don't have to be nice to you. . . I. . ."

She suddenly, and almost nervously, stretched the quilt tight and raised her knees and made a little tent out of the quilt and her body.

"This room is nicer than you expected, isn't it? I do have good taste, don't I? My room is always nicer than anybody expects."

Attis moved so he could see her again. "Yes," he said.

"I'm careful never to let anyone see this room," she said. "But. . . But. It's not any of that. It doesn't bother me what you did with the picture. Really. The picture has nothing to do with Jesus. I got the worst one I could find. I really did. Isn't it terrible? I had to hunt a long time. . . It actually looks like he's wearing lipstick, doesn't it? Doesn't it look that way to you?"

"Yes," Attis said.

"I know," she said. "But I shouldn't tell you that. I think it's just grand. Oh, what was I saying? I want so much to explain it to you, Attis. It could be anything. Anything at all. It could be *my* picture. It's just when. . ."

But then she stopped. She stopped and didn't say anything and seemed, all of a sudden, to be looking beyond Attis and at her own reflection in the mirror. She sat there looking a long time.

"What am I talking about?" she said at last, in a quiet, amazed voice. "Just what in the world am I *talking* about? I don't have anything to explain to you. I'm lying, Attis. Don't listen to me. I'm sitting right here on my death bed and lying to you and putting on a little act. I didn't really plan anything. I didn't even want it. I couldn't have wanted it, could I? Could I possibly have wanted to be ugly? Could I? *Could* I? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Attis suddenly realized that there were tears now in Aunt Stelly's eyes.

"I'm a very vain woman, Attis. Can you believe that? I'm a very vain and aloof old woman, can you possibly *believe* that? Sometimes I don't think I believe it myself. . . . Are you listening?"

"Yes."

She looked up. "I told you to stop listening," she said, and reached out and touched his hand. "No don't. Don't. Go ahead and listen. I trust you, you know that? I trust you."

Attis nodded, but he felt fraudulent and uncomfortable. The tears in Aunt Stelly's eyes made her look almost like a child. She wiped the tears away quickly with the back of her hand and looked up and smiled and waited, but Attis didn't say anything. Aunt Stelly fluffed the pillow behind her and eased down in the bed again. "How many people are waiting downstairs?"

"I don't know," Attis said. "There was Elwood and Billy and Uncle Randall."

"Everybody gets to watch me die," Aunt Stelly said.

"You're not. . ." Attis said automatically, and stopped.

"Actually, what I'm *doing*," Aunt Stelly said, "is. . ." She stopped. "What I'm doing is giving a sort of *texture* to your childhood. I think you could call it that, couldn't you? Couldn't you? I hope you appreciate it, because I don't much feel like it. Actually, I feel almost drunk. I've felt drunk ever since you came in. I want you to remember, Attis, a hundred years from now when you're dying. . . I want you to remember if *you* feel almost drunk and tell me. . . You can tell me up in heaven if you make it. OK? You promise? How old are you now?"

"Thirteen."

"Then it won't be a hundred years, will it? It sure won't. You aren't very religious are you?"

Attis shook his head indefinitely, but didn't answer.

"But I'll bet you remember this conversation. I *intend* for you to remember

it. I'll bet you remember promising to die. Boy oh boy. You think you won't, but I'll bet you do. I hope you do anyway. You'd better. I'm doing you a big favor, Attis."

She slipped her arms beneath the quilt.

"I don't have a reputation for being ornery, do I?" she asked softly.

"No ma'am."

"Do you think I could be any more ornery?"

"I don't think you're being ornery at all."

"Of course you don't. We've already established that. You don't think or *do* anything. You just watch and listen and act polite."

She slowly folded the quilt so it was completely up to her neck, then folded it down once so she was tucked in everywhere and her body was no longer a lump but a low mound with her slightly green head sticking out at one end. "Why don't you go on and let someone else have a turn. Hurry. Get out of here."

Attis heard her, but felt somehow that she was no longer talking to him. "Are you serious?" he asked.

"Yesss, I'm serious. . And listen."

"Ma'am?"

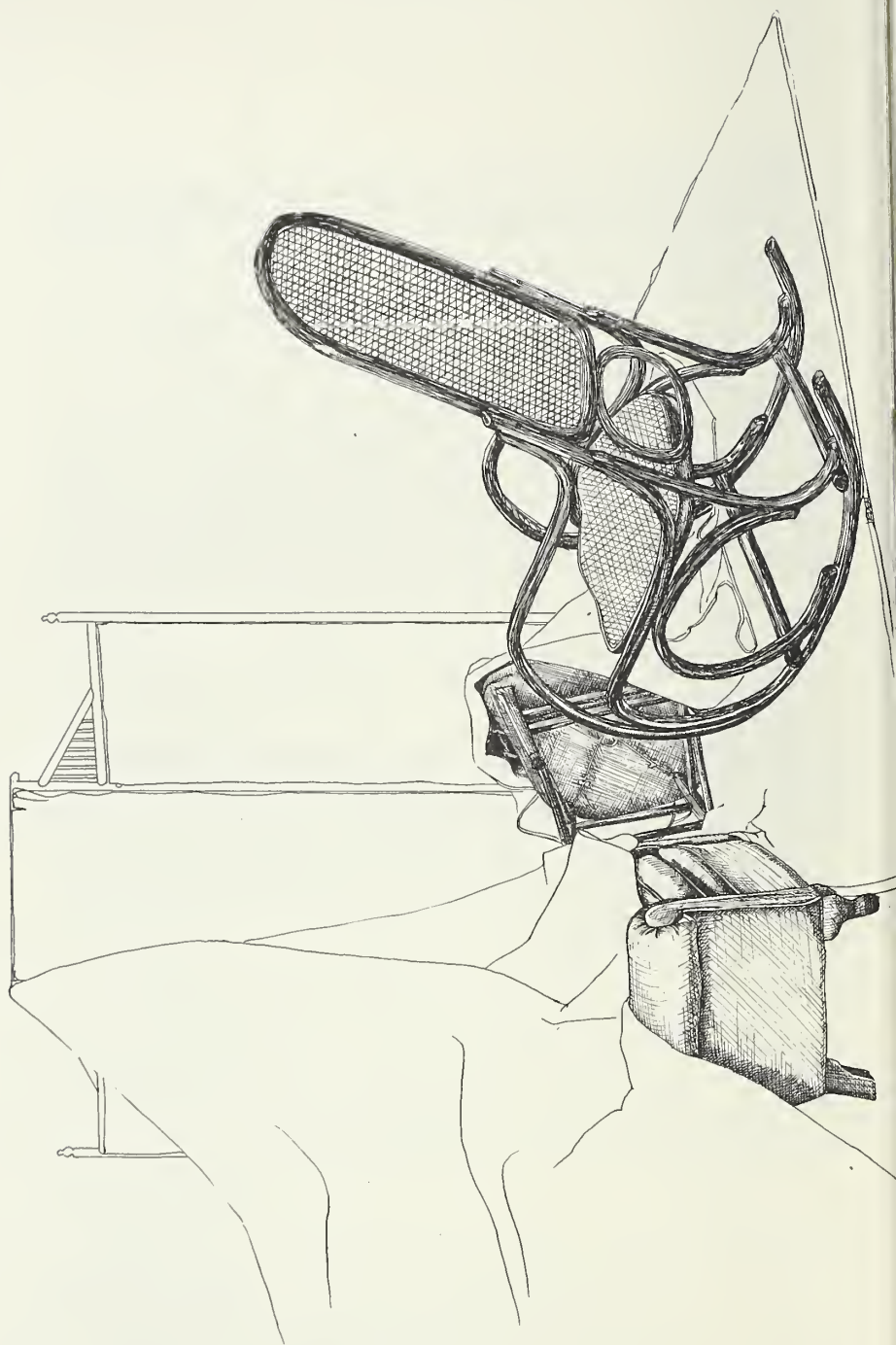
"Come back."

She pulled one hand out of the covers and gestured with it till he came close, then she clutched at his hand and her soft, warm fingers closed damply around his. They felt like little chicken bones embedded in loose flesh. "Goodbye Attis, OK? You hear me? Goodbye."

"I'll see you later."

"The hell you will," she said. "Goodbye and get out. Now. Go. *Hurry*," she said, turning quickly away.

"Yes ma'am."



To the Wild Rose

No, no, I always did and do deny
That Eden's every corner must be lush,
A teeming, gleaming, rich homotony.
I know too well the sparse and scrubby brush
Which sprawled across the landscape of my youth,
Sprung up from yellow clay as hard as stone,
The stunted sumac which in fall blazed truth,
And briars' snarling arcs (the black snake's zone)
Which in the summer sun bowed black with fruit,
And always (field day for the man who scorns)
Gnarled hawthorn clumps, becrowned at each stiff shoot
With sour gems and ruthless, thirsty thorns.

Above all else the wild rose comes to mind,
Its thick and coarse-spurred canes at home in clay,
Its palely pink and fragile buds a fine
Reminder of the basic ways of May,
When beauty's born, sometimes, on toughest stalks.
Come autumn sun, the bush grows rich with hips,
Which bitter beads are counters for hushed talks
By migrant monarchs contemplating trips.

My friend Edward McDowell, if I am right,
Unwinds by choice but part of this cocoon.
He bears the quiet beauty into light,
The simple, sweet limpidity of June,
With just a trace of the unstartling truth
That nothing pink or gold or green will last.
What I would add demands a sharper tooth
To cut that clay from which our Eden's cast,
To match the rose's nails which lineate,
To mash those orange berries which come late,
Shine bright, and only then capitulate,
Edenic pap for man to ruminate.

Two Poems

Cheryl Stiles

Eden

for Eric Denton

He has raked into his blood
deceptive greenery.
The dying plants beneath his feet
cry rape of stone
and rivet of mud;
he does not listen.

The earth is a pure woman.
Adam is drinking her milk
and gnashing his seed
into her moonripe mosses.

She is tiring of it. The red
mouth has parted last...
her liquid-filled mountains
are falling
like dark stars.

She will finish soon,
a true performer, taking
bows and
gutless, gutless

God's image, spiritless son,
will see no glory
in the final performance.
His soul is rotting;
he can muster no black applause.

Knot

My head bumped against the wall.
That's always good;
it's quite a brilliant trick actually.

Now there's a knot,
black and blue and fat as a berry pie,
on my forehead.

It looks like a mountain.
Moses must be there with the
Israelites, the Chosen People,

searching for the Promised Land.
I'm God. I'll show them –
I'll shrink it; I'll think the swelling down.

They'll find no home here.
Screaming and crying, they'll be
swallowed up in my earth.

The Viewer's Eye

There is something very wrong with *Last Tango in Paris* and it has nothing to do with the exposure of skin or the performance of unnatural acts. It has everything to do with the way these matters — and the rest of the dramatic action of the film — are treated. When I saw the movie for the first time, I made a comment which I feared might be a little pat and probably an injustice to the film. I said, "It takes a special talent to make a dull film that includes suicide, murder, sodomy, and rape." After seeing the film again recently, I find I must stick by my original conclusion. *Last Tango* may indeed represent a turning point in the history of film but the turn is down.

In his writing class, Reynolds Price hypothesizes a similar turn in the history of the novel. According to Price, after World War I, with the appearance of novels like *Ulysses* and *Remembrance of Things Past*, narrative turned away from the kinds of materials that had sustained it and made it popular in the nineteenth century. Instead, by trying to tackle experience in a more complicated fashion, the novel began to remove itself from its audience. The how of the story began to dominate the why and the what in ways that had never concerned Austen or Tolstoy.

As Price points out, the result is simple: people stopped reading novels. No crowds line up to buy the latest by Pynchon as they had once queued up to get *Nicholas Nickleby* or *Oliver Twist*. The audience shrunk from the literate to the super-literate: you needed a graduate course in Joyce — or at least Stuart Gilbert by your bedside — if you wanted to plod through *Ulysses*. Provided you had that much interest — or stamina — to start with. None of which is to say that Joyce or those he has influenced are not great artists. It is to say that the novel quite often these days seems to have forgotten that it might be read by someone other than the writer's friends or by an assortment of highly trained graduate students.

I fear Bertolucci has fallen in much the same kind of trap, if not the same trap. His sin is not that of story sacrificed to technique or stylistic innovation. Rather the filmmaker has succeeded too well in — not capturing — but *recreating* the dullness he finds apparent in the modern condition. Once audiences tire of the sight of Maria Schneider's breasts or Marlon Brando's disquisitions on porcine intercourse, they will likely just not go to such movies. Art may be long but notoriety is brief. *Ulysses* was much more

interesting to the mass of readers under ban of law. Ten years from now or twenty, Pauline Kael may be showering praises on the heirs of *Last Tango* but she may also be the only one in the theater.

The problem with *Last Tango in Paris* is certainly not one of intelligence or craft. It has more of those qualities than most films that appear. The point, though, is not the presence of intelligence or craft but the ends to which they are directed. Bertolucci has used his gifts and skills to create a fabric textured of images in which he *involves* us, so that we seem to live the hours that the movie is before us, live them in the petty sordidness and cheap monotony that the filmmaker makes us see.

There are different forces at work here, in film, than in fiction and other art forms. In a recent essay in *The Southern Review* ("The Delta Factor"), Walker Percy points towards one of these differences in his discussion of a peculiar mode of escape from the modern malaise. He notes how a man, sunk in misery, immediately feels better if he starts to read a book about another man sunk in misery.

But the viewer of *Last Tango* finds no such release. This is the surface result it seems to me of a deeper difference between film and other art: novels for instance are played out in the mind's eye and the reading of any fiction is always an imaginative act. The reader has to take abstract qualities — words — and translate them into images in his mind. The writer can direct this process of image-making, shape it in directions he desires but he cannot finally control it. Walter Scott may spend two pages describing Ivanhoe but every reader picking up the novel will picture the character a little differently, see the man in his own way.

With film, this gap — between the minds' eyes of writer and reader — is eliminated. The viewer of film sees the same image as the film's maker so that the latter has unique power to shape the way the viewer reacts to the image. No artist can control reaction completely but by knowing the exact image the viewer will see, the filmmaker is a step closer than the novelist. The viewer of the film is literally seeing the film through the filmmaker's eye.

Going back to Percy, the differences between the novel of misery which relieves a man of misery and the film of misery, like *Last Tango*, lies, I think, in this distinction of the mind's eye and the eye. It is this active quality of reading fiction, the quality of using imagination to *see*, that makes a reader transcend the pettiness of either his life or the life of the character he is reading about. It is almost a formula of Wallace Stevens's ideal: the imagination and the reality are both brought into play. We see the reality by use of the imagination and are happier than either the reality of our own life or of the life we read about would allow us to expect.

The viewer of the film of unrelieved misery gets no such relief. His action of viewing is passive. He sees, not in his mind's eye, but in his literal eye,

and not even in *his* eye but in the eye of the filmmaker. There is no imaginative leap lying between reality and reality; there is only the will of keeping the eyelids raised.

The question then becomes what reality should film show and my conclusion is that film is in serious trouble if it forgets that it is basically more simple-minded than other art forms. And I mean simple-minded on the part of the viewer, not the creator, because of this passive quality in viewing film I have been discussing.

The ironic result is that film must deal in more complex images. The problem with *Last Tango in Paris* is that it is too stark: coming away from the film I had the visual recollection of the stained walls of the apartment, a few husks of furniture glowing dully in yellow afternoon light, of darkness and semi-darkness, of streets barren in pre-dawn light, of faces dull even in love, even in pain. Our lives — or some lives — may indeed be made of such images, but I don't think film can show lives in just such a way.

And that is not to say that film means Disney, all sweetness and light and laughs. Look at Bergman. The memories I carried away from *Cries and Whispers* were rich, colorful, ornate — and gruesome, infected: reds of wallpaper and blood, craftsmanship of gown and cut glass, the green of the garden and the gray of death, the silent stare of a person who has said too little for too long, the contortion of a face dying and unable to draw breath. These are vivid images, intensely visual but never dull, despite the pall of dullness hanging over the characters' lives.

As said earlier, Bertolucci has fallen in the same kind of trap that Joyce did, just as Bergman has avoided it. A man like Dostoyevsky used his genius to create the story and simplified the transmission of the images that make up that story so that the weight of significance those images bear could be greater. *The Brothers Karamozov* is a murder mystery and any bright junior high student could read it well enough to tell the plot. Yet the Russian's work is among the most profound ever written. Joyce used his genius to complicate the images so that by unraveling those images the reader could see the writer's mind at work. That required a great talent but it was talent put to uses incompatible with the telling of a story, fiction's traditional purpose.

Bergman uses his genius to create powerful images to tell stories about people caught in the malaise. Our excitement about the images frees us to take in his portrayal of that misery. Bertolucci has gone away from the powerful visual image — just as Joyce left the story — and he has created a film that, once it loses notoriety, few will want to see.

For the powerful visual image, Bertolucci has substituted something skillful. He draws us into the world of lonely monotony and makes us live that world by exactly reproducing it and forcing us to see it precisely as he

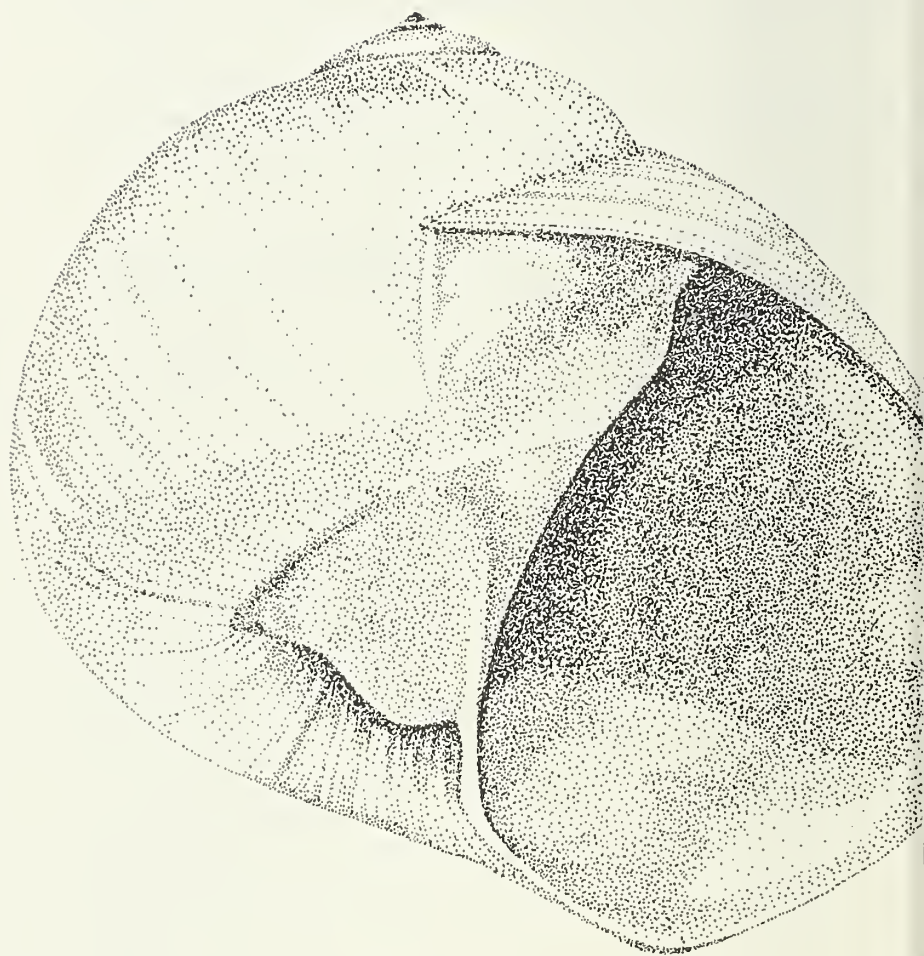
did. Images of dullness to portray dullness. In the abstract, that sounds logical, even, in a phrase someone might use, what is demanded by the canons of "artistic integrity."

Perhaps the problem is that of all art, though, and maybe every art form will someday destroy itself because its final development is always self-destruction. The imperative of change forces the form away from what it is into, not what it will be, but what it cannot be. A novel as one long scream or a painting as a blank canvas may be honest but, in the end, who besides the creator really cares?

Art implies audience. For the sake of film, I hope Bertolucci is not a herald but a warning, or, better yet, a reminder, a reminder that film begins not in the mind but in the eye and it must delight or excite the eye or the mind back of that eye will go away.

March 1975

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The News of Patroclus

(Sing in me, Muse, the fury
of Achilles son of Peleus,
and of its laying waste, which brought
a thousand griefs upon the Greeks
and flung souls thousandfold to Hades, souls
of hard warriors, who left their bodies carrion
for birds and slinking dogs...
all this so that the wish of Zeus
might come about, through bitterness
between huge Agamemnon, chief of men,
and the god-born paragon, blinding Achilles...)

His silence burned like slow gas
in the tent, through silences
between the herald's apprehensive, useless, lamentatory words.
He gestured, and the herald was gone at last;
the tent-flap dropped. He sat.
He had forgotten everything:
the shouts, the burning ships,
and Agamemnon's virgin concubine...
his hand-picked harem of handmaidens
on a rota, and the daydream
of the sea-trip home...
Henceforward, when a girl fell slack and dying
for the glory of his touch,
he knew only a corpse.
Like those hurt in love, he had been hurt
so much he had become invulnerable.
He sat. Then threw away the lyre
and armed and slung the short sword at his thigh.
He went out to the hard, pure light,
the dust, the oaktree and the Skaian gate,
stooping quickly to tie
the loosened sandal tighter at his heel of clay.

Snow at Dawn

Snow's fallen overnight. The insomniac stares
 At the awaited dawn, while couples dream,
 Rerecognize, recouple. Infants scream
 For milk temperate as blood behind their bars
 Or struggle due, late or untimely out of wombs.
 The day rings, workmen rise. In the depot
 Dim lights come on in empty buses. Snow
 Astonishes a million curtained rooms.
 The tramp, the Stock Exchange sodality,
 The poet and the T.V. personality
 Wake amidst newspapers. Snow scarfs the real
 And simplifies the world to the Ideal.
 In hospital, a pumped-out suicide,
 From her emetic, dreamlike lassitude,
 Wakes to the taste of rubber and the smell
 Of ether in a curtained bed, not hell.

Some symbol of the pure Ethereal
 Or of infernal cold, this keen bright air,
 That abstract world?

An immaterial

Whiteness. Thought drifts. Eyes read the cereal
 Box. The cheap offer of a garden chair.

(Last night a wind blew cold through the concrete
 Columns of the concrete overpasses,
 Down white-tiled illuminated subways
 Where no one came. In slow all-night cafes
 And brilliant desolate launderettes
 The neon whined, steamed windows ran with nightsweats.
 Empty, sleepless men nursed dregs in glasses —
 Now slumped, now sat, now prone on bench or seat.

What lurked in the suburbs?

Was massing

In corners, over empty office-blocks left bright
 On nothing, a ferocious motor-cycle kicked
 Alive in a late street?
 In bedrooms where tight-wound alarm-clocks ticked
 And houses whose windows were stoned-out or bricked,
 Above the stumbled feet
 In rubble rooms, home of the drunk, the derelict,
 The city's low and yellow ambience of light,
 What hung?

The hemisphere of night passing.)

Now midnight's newspapers are read, unfurled
 In early urban trains. Outside, dawn blues
 To black and white at cuttings. Crossword clues.
 Some rape case. Chile. Snow. The Market news.
 The darkness passes onward round the world,
 Fleeing like cloud unshadowing a field.
 Pneumatic doors hiss open, are re-sealed
 At empty quays, as dead air rushes through
 The tunnels. Halitosis, neon, flu;
 Last night's dead cigarette smoke; dull, scuffed shoes.
 At each successive stop, a silent troop
 Of men debouched or entered. Arts. The pound
 Has dropped. A model's breasts. The underground
 Pursues its endless, labyrinthine loop.

Anadyomene

The parade passes in a sauntered frieze
of oiled bronzage: ilium,

and pectoral, and thigh; lovers stylized
as advertisements, wall-paintings

of the Pharoahs; a leisurely, aristocratic
club of bodies burnt greener

than olives, dark as the reflected glare
of watching, smokedglass lenses.

You wade from the Mediterranean
towards me; milky breasts sunned strapless,

freed. Bride of the sun, you come
with unashamed, shy pride, as if only to me.

And you are suntanned and you blind me
like a mirror. But the heartache

on the crowded beach is for your sudden beauty
that is yours only to give.

Chanson de l'Après-Midi

(adapted from Baudelaire)

Jeanne, your beige flesh gives off perfume
heavy as a censer's, to excite
and agitate me, like the night
the voyeur chafing in his room...

I'm lost... All day you sidle
through my thought, fevered with waiting –
and I spend my night prostrating
like a bent priest at an idol.

One sly, sidelong glance from your eyes
incites me, like some roue's potion...
I drown in you like the ocean,
whose caress could make the dead rise!

Each long, slow thigh infatuates
itself... each hand your back, each breast –
posed, self-besotted, you're obsessed
by mirrors where your languor waits...

One kiss at your mouth and I swoon,
to die... your tongue thrusts weakness in
my heart, struck blind with awe and sin,
your mocking gaze calm as the moon...

Clinging to your instep's sultry,
silk disdain, I throw beneath your feet
my joy, my genius, my fate –
abject with lust, the price is paltry...

You are all colour, meaning, light
to me! You make my damned soul beat
like a nerve – Explosion of blood heat
in my black, Siberian night!

La Beauté

(adapted from Baudelaire)

To you I am lovely, a dream urged in the stone
breasts your heart, rich & sensitive as any bruise,
you offer to, a morbid peach. Me you lack, and lose
all day forever, numb with wistfulness; yet throne

me in your blues, and queen my ambiguity.
You skirt shy, nervous circles of my marble spell,
but whiteness has entranced my heart to marble,
stilled my sculpted stone smile at vacuity.

So shy you are, you herd in like a class! I pose.
I cast it from a statue: just as you who bow,
to overplay, abstraction, as on books... and lose

all study in its diligence: a pupil's vow
to live, a small reflection, in his mistress' eyes.
Mine widen, filling with slowly passing skies.

Avoiding The Moonbeams

from a novel in progress

When he got over his illness he stayed home for another week; work was a strain on his nerves, and when his nerves were strained bacteria would swamp his vascular systems like hungry picnic ants ravaging stale sandwich meat. Jonathan often felt like stale sandwich meat. The nerves.

On Monday he stayed cozily in his bed. There was no reason to lie on his back all day, occasionally propping himself up and reading. There was no reason, and yet he did it. On Monday he watched the television and perused a battered copy of *Sports Illustrated* which was two years old and lay in the drawer of his night-table. Sport in perspective — how feeble it all seemed: batting averages, a pennant race the outcome of which mattered not at all, color glossy photographs of two black middleweight boxers, one bleeding garishly over the eye, the other frozen in a sinister punch, the one that would send the bloodied man to the canvas, so read the caption. Just two frozen fighters (one probably selling vacuum cleaners in Newark, New Jersey right now), smoke hanging in the black air behind them, and the expectant eyes hovering at ringside. They waited, the sweat beaded there on their black skin; but none of it mattered worth a damn! It was a lesson Jonathan felt seeping through his flesh, a faintly sick feeling like falling — in the lining of his stomach.

The best reading was downstairs, a good spy novel, new magazines, that new one with the Polynesian girl in the center, black-silk hair tilting around island-dark skin, soft to touch, oval brown nipples, wide and smooth and salty coins of flesh, fruit nearly ripe and hanging in the air, hand thrust to her cunt, black Polynesian bush beneath, and the sheets all gold and disshevelled, those brown eyes, and her legs bent and relaxed in a wide motion, that look in her eyes, that look on the page folded in the magazine on a downstairs table. Torturing photographs. He watched the television and forgot her and the way he thought she tasted. He left her there.

There was an advertisement for chewing gum. Spearmint. He would not leave his warm bed with the limp and soiled sheets. No, he would not leave. Perhaps he was waiting for the sickness to come back, to overwhelm him. It was destined to come again and invade his vascular and other vulnerable systems. He thought he could feel it sneaking beside him. Get away! Scat! he said silently. It was a silly thing to let happen, a weak and spineless thought, but Jonathan (soft, fat, twenty-five, the father of a daughter he loved, a daughter he never intended, a little green-eyed girl who hated him for it he

was sure) could not help but entertain a sick and heartless faith in the fact that he would die before ever leaving his bed again.

He lay back, the crinkling of the pillowcase against his stiff and hairy head, strange sounds settling by his ear. A long blow of breath, a lung-ful of exasperated breath sent flying between his lips and whistling in his sinus — tension, like from a tire. His chest calmed and moved quietly. His daughter: Melody, like a tune tripping along the tongue she was, seven years with hazel eyes, his skinny daughter of the heartless fuck, a high school boy's awkward gropings; I was young and such a fool, she hates me I know. But she has a home. Her mother is a stupid hard woman with a temper, but then she has reasons to be; we all have reasons. Marcia, dear Marcia, my ex-wife? Makes me sound old. She raises her well, being a solid woman and a strong gauge for a child to measure out a life. An assured beginning. That was all a parent could do, and then it was *hasta luego, pequita*, half the bus fare and she was gone. A big hateful woman someday. She will never let me repent in my old age. I ought to be allowed that. She will be a resentful and hard bitch; she will spurn me (her fat old man) forever.

He hadn't seen her in two weeks, since the horse show. The kid loved goddamned horses. And there was Marcia (the mother of my baby?) with iced tea in hand on the side porch, waving to him as he left Melody off, waving with her absurd round sun-glasses, her body looking like a beached sea cow's, humped there in her flowery lounge chair chatting with some skinny neighbor woman who looked like a bird-neurotic for sure.

In his sarcophagus Jonathan concluded that the whole world was fucking neurotic.

Even Melody, who wouldn't speak to him in the car driving home. Her lips were all red and pouty, her brow pinched determinedly between her staring eyes. I didn't mean it that way, he had said. You know that I love your Mother very much, now don't you honey?

He had called Marcia a bitch under his breath because she had given Melody a note for dear Daddy which read "Where's the two hundred dollars? Don't be a weasel. She's your daughter too Jonathan, though nobody could tell by the way you act. Be decent Jonathan. — Marcia."

The miserable unctuous bitch!

Ah, forget that now, enough of that. The television talking in the corner; I'll lay and listen all day and all night, memorize the test pattern so that I can draw it in my head. Never been much with the real thing, only in my head. I can see the most beautiful things in my head sometimes: my intentions. Never have been much with my hands, too clumsy, too crude. Just a good ole boy from Asheville is all I am — hell! Is that all I am? (And all you'll ever be, boy, my father said, over and over, until the day the motherfucker died in his sleep and loosed his stinking bowels upon the sheets. I smelled him when

Mother called before I hit the top of the stairs. Then I knew: death, Daddy's shit.)

I listen to the television in my loneliest hours.

The virgin on the beach says, the wind whipping her cheeks, "A woman's body is her best friend. I love the quick, clean sensation of the sea air. And I love. . .," you love *what*? A disposable douche, the fragrance, feminine hygiene. Yes. A clean cunt is a happy cunt. The fine-lined, wide-mouthed vulva grin gaping into a laugh — ha-ha, like brushing the teeth, no cavities, and smell the mint.

I am a friend in need, remember? But television is no escape. I'd change the channel but I want to lie and not move until death comes over me. Her woman body moves closer, filling the screen, green waves crashing behind. Polynesia. Resignation. O fuck. Jonathan shuts his eyes to the wasted day. There, she comes, she soothes, her ready brown nipples big as polished coconuts standing upward to his touch, wanting lightly to be licked, his lips ready, his tongue in a swirl moving 'round the hard center, the rest a feast, wondrous food for the hungry, for a needy man.

Stop it Jonathan! Adolescent dreaming. Stupid.

Dammit — no relief. And what a day to die.

* * *

When he awoke Jonathan delayed the opening of his crusty eyes, his body numb with the memory of such sweet unconsciousness, his nose stuffed up and airless; his bed was without scent. He drew slow breaths through his mouth. His tongue was dry and gluey, tasting acrid, the ugly bitterness of waking. Tasting it. Lungs easing in and out. Blood pumping with a faint sensation through his skull and around his ears. He was alive.

His eyelids peeled open and he saw that evening was upon him as he had feared. He knew the signs of evening: the washed-out light from the window, the colors and lines of the room muted, the shadows darkened and fuzzy and almost alive with the formlessness of the light, the shadows deep in the farthest places, taking on shapes, shaping black horrors before night. This was the most frightening time of any day, the changing and wild world loosed so upon the mind (like shit upon some sheets when. . .), so sweet and dreamless a moment ago, unguarded now as the intangible creatures of evening throb.

There! Can you hear that hissing rising up behind the ears like wind or waves, not an actual sound, but growing to a roar — can you hear it? It's the awful roar of silence and of the evening preying upon me, dammit. I'm still alive. To be preyed upon.

Perhaps I can still do it, I feel I nearly can, to strain myself through my body and slip like a slippery eel through this tiny crack between night and day, so slight you scarcely see it, to swim through to death. Frightening

death, frightening evening. Sonuvabitch. Nothing to be afraid of — a face in the doorway! No, no, not to move, relax, the heart pounding like a fucking hammer again. I'll die of stroke before anything. I believe, my frightened heart. Close the eyes tight toward waiting for a darker time; I'm more sure-footed in the pitch dark, an animal of the night; or maybe I could grab for the light switch, the lamp by the bed — but what if it didn't go on?!

A racing in his fluttering veins. Shit, this is ridiculous. A grown man for God's sake. Why am I bound to this miserable bed like a coil of rope. Now Melody, Melody! Come in here to bed with Daddy, and don't be afraid, let him protect you, nothing to be afraid of, my baby, my baby-doll, there now, nothing can ever harm you; you're a frail-limbed puppy, I'll chase it all away like a flock of silly birds, so wrap my neck with your pink arms and sleep by me — sweet Melody, please sleep in my warmth, your sweet innocent child-breath. My Melody.

The pressure of sadness and want behind the eyes. Damn, now clamp them shut. The tears restrained, then ebbing away at last.

And now it was evening, and what should he do?

The clamor of an engine — a guttural, huffing car coming nearer, the cracking of gravel under the weight of slow-rolling tires — who the hell. . . ?

Jonathan started up in bed and lumbered to the window to peek upon the driveway. Cautious, he peeked like the Sundance Kid from his mountain hide-away.

Their vision is made of bullets. To see me is to kill me.

It was Benjamin, a weak evening lustre across the hood of his Volkswagen. The headlights dimmed, then expired.

Jonathan dragged up the window and stuck his oversized head into the warm air, the evening air which textured his heavy lungs, the summer air ripe with the the scent of trees, a blow of honeysuckle, gone.

Benjamin glanced up and stopped on the walkway. He had a brown bag under his arm and his face was dark. His eyes were pins of light gazing up. "There you are, eh?" he cried, "How are you feeling today?"

The air had made Jonathan dizzy. The night was closing in, it seemed, too quickly now. "I'm fucking dying, Benjy," he said.

"You are? Well don't go just yet. I need you right now, drink a bottle of wine and forget all this sickness. Have you been in bed?"

"Yes, but I was up all last night, and damn. . . ."

"It doesn't matter, I would've gotten you up anyway. I need somebody to drink a bottle with, some enlivening company, some witty conversation — what do you say?" Benjamin hesitated, just a black form now, but his eyes were still lit.

Nearly anyone else Jonathan could ignore, but Benjamin could not be put off because he knew too much. It made one uncomfortable at times. He

didn't even have to say it, to call you a lazy motherfucker, a self-pitying snake coiled in seclusion — he just looked at you the right way sometimes, and he knew you, and you knew damned well that he knew you. A mirror for all of my unpleasantries, Jonathan thought. But tonight, for some reason, Jonathan smiled to see him.

"I don't have a bottle of wine," Jonathan said.

"I have three," he grinned, patting the bag with his hand. There was some peculiar kindness in his voice, his still figure planted below in the shadow of the house. A good business partner, and damned tolerant. He knows me, though he still comes in the middle of the night. I don't know why. A strong and sure instrument of living; he was like Marcia, except Marcia was not of the living, she was merely an instrument, strong and sure. And he knows too much about the wrong things. Does he want something — to punish me? Shit, I'm a fat prima donna, these childish hands and pudgy white knuckles that could never catch a damned football so they stuck me on the line. I beefed up the middle. I'm an irresponsible ass. I know this. I'm sorry. Hurt me.

Jonathan leaned farther out over the ledge and coughed unnecessarily. "I'm sorry I didn't get into the store today. I could have," he said, and his cumbrous stomach strained against the window pane; he felt dizzy; the sweet air made him dizzy.

"Don't fall out the window. Couldn't catch you there Jonathan. Take it easy or we'll lose all this expensive wine trying to save you. Six bucks a bottle, what do you say?"

Jonathan nodded and staggered to the light switch and pulled on some clothes. The fog behind his eyes was lifting, the television off, the room solid again and unassuming. He blew his nose, then rinsed his face in the sink. Eyes clear. Too much color in the face for a dying man.

Benjamin had let himself in and now whistled idly in the kitchen, a melody resonating weakly through the house. That old song, and Jonathan began mumbling lyrics as he slipped on his clumsy sandals, "Well candy is dandy but liquor is quicker gonna drink all the liquor down in Costa Rica, yeah, ain't nobody's business but my own, dat da-da da-da dat da," ummmm, forgot the next verse. Ah well, no matter, but something like "Cocaine gonna make me lazy." Cocaine is very expensive. I could never afford it even if I wanted to.

Jonathan stopped singing. He was an ex-Baptist who was not reared on drinking songs, let alone bluesy ballads about cocaine and other opium derivatives. Opium derivatives? Opium? His mother had never had a drink until she was forty-nine. They had fixed her a hot toddy the night his father died, to help her sleep. She had sucked it down without knowing what it was, staring at the wall.

But Benjamin was a fucking Cherokee indian, feathers in his head-dress, bats in his belfry, and a strange light-glow behind the pupils of his black eyes.

Indians cannot drink.

If there was anything that Jonathan did well it was drink until his socks were soggy.

Well then, down the stairs with thudding steps and sandals slapping his thick heels. Onward to Canterbury you grovelling pilgrims! Upon your miserable steeds and onward! Tell me a tale, Benjy, something wild and unbelievable; tell me a tale and make me sing! You and you alone. Only you.

* * *

Benjamin stretched and scanned Jonathan's living room, seeing nothing. There was no sense to it. Thinking of the senselessness, his eyes were blank.

Time is a meandering, and love is a travelling. It moves like water, and people are like water, they rise, they fall, they change like water. But love is a travelling and it has to end somewhere. A frightening thought. When it's right it isn't frightening, only when it's wrong, when it's strange and rushing toward some fall like a waterfall between the throbbing chambers of my heart where love is splashed upon the rocks. Katie, it's hard to be near you now: I scarcely see it really, but I know you move away. Oh Katie, to touch you at the heart. But then why are you crying, because everything will be all right like before (before what?), because you told me so yourself, so there is no reason, I know of no reason; now rest your cheek upon my shoulder, there, and hug my chest and make me wet with it, this thing, these sudden tears. Don't cry, please. It frightens me when there is no reason and my body is so strange to you. Why is this happening to us frightening when this is happening to us distance that I hate so in my stomach feel it gnawing with no reason, no reason, and my heart settles in my chest like a blind and trembling pussycat. But still, come here, and bring your strange, relentless crying, these aching cries gnawing silently in your throat where they can't escape, your awful wide-mouthed silence. Can't you say even a word to me? No, so just shake your head into my shirt and my warmth, sniffing at my sleeve, and here is some kleenex from my nightstand. Just a word, baby? A why?

"I'm sorry," you said, "I'm so sorry, dear God, I am."

That was all.

Sleep then; go to sleep. A kiss upon the scalp, your weary head, a puzzle, a kiss for dreams. I'll watch you, Katie. My Kate.

Benjamin was thinking, closing his eyes, crossing his feet upon the sofa arm and thinking forbidden things. He shifted on his back and tucked his arm beneath his head. Wine was crisp and volatile upon his tongue and in

his breath (hanging in his throat, rushing past his nostrils); it ran a warmth in his stomach and his blood; it heated gently the pores of his tingling skin. Katherine's eyes and her thin hair, softness, her freckled nose in the summer, and one lonely freckle on her breast; she was smooth-skinned with fragile shoulders and she walked funny; he could spot her at a thousand yards, bouncing back and forth on those springy legs, the warm legs that covered him in the night. He always knew when it was Katie coming. Fuck, he wanted to wrap her all up in him (was it just the wine that made him so maudlin?), but she was at home and probably wondering where he was; and he was here. Eyes open now, the ceiling to stare at, and Katherine gone. Kate Kate, here I come, I'm coming home.

Then Jonathan leaned forward and poured the last of his bottle in the glass. The sides of the glass were smeared with finger grease, a ghastly sight Jonathan thought, because of the germs. The rim was sticky against his lower lip as he sloshed the last down. The ethyl alcohol would kill the bugs.

Jonathan squinted and said, "You're looking pretty grim over there old boy. Wake up, enough is enough. Indians shouldn't drink, can't handle it — genetic, right? You look contemplative as all hell and you're not helping me any, so — arise Benjamin, off your ass."

"I was thinking about Katherine."

"She's beautiful. You going to get married finally, huh? Is that it?"

"You swear a lot when you drink, did you know that? God, but it frightens me sometimes." He listened to the clock ticking.

"My swearing? Bullshit."

"No, not that. The other."

"Yeah, I envy you Benjy. Marcia and I — we just didn't go together. We weren't *functional* was the problem, like tits on a bull. It was unnatural as hell." Jonathan gazed thoughtfully, his eyelid drooping across his iris and contemplating sleep.

"Katie's a good girl," Benjamin said. "She is, you know, really. Because I love her more than anything. She's a good girl. She has to be." Benjamin took a long breath. She has to be, he thought. She is.

"Goddamn Indians can't drink, that's the truth." Jonathan lit a cigarette and handed it across to Benjamin as if to a wounded soldier on a stretcher. Battlefield, bombs, shrapnel — this kind of love could be very dramatic. He had watched an Audie Murphy movie on the late show the night before.

Benjamin took it, rolling it between his fingers. He felt a thousand years old and a thousand pounds heavy. He smoked it half-way down.

Then he looked across at Jonathan and his eyes were tired too; and Jonathan saw that the light was hardly there, just embers, a pale glowering perhaps, perhaps the lamp reflected.

"You drunk?" Benjamin asked.

"No," he lied, "maybe just a little buzz. I absorb more than you. More cushion. Better drinking genes."

"I am. Did you like the wine? It was good wine."

"Excellent, Benjy."

"It was good wine. Expensive as hell — half your soul and your first-born male, down payment. Hardly fair. My soul I'd give gladly, but the rest is extravagance."

"I think the wine was this day's panacea. Had to be good. It saved me," Jonathan said.

"You feel better then?"

"I'll be into the store tomorrow. I feel better." Jonathan truly did. He pounded his chest.

"Ah, I don't give a shit about that," Benjamin said, "things are slow anyway, and the girls have really picked up the slack. You know how to hire, I'll say that. They're a decent bunch. Even lovely Sheila."

"Are you ready to go? ShoveI you in the door; let Katie prop you up."

"I'm not that drunk. But it *was* good wine. Damn." Benjamin hesitated, watching the nub of his cigarette, the twirling smoke, rolling it between his unsteady fingers. "Always been the best," he said.

The two sat in silence for what seemed minutes, Jonathan scratching his belly and wondering what strange thoughts were sheltered in Benjamin's head. Benjamin's black Cherokee hair, his primitive pagan body, his slim but animal strong body. Benjamin the drunken oracle. He really was: and thinking strange thoughts.

Finally Benjamin slowly parted his lips; then he mumbled something to himself. "She loves me," he said. Benjamin's eyes slid shut, nodding, yes she does. Yes.

Seized by a queer restlessness, Jonathan stood. "Damn good wine Benjy old boy," he said smiling, rising to get his car keys in the upstairs bedroom. . . .

Benjamin's mind was spinning in a spaceless place. His spinnings were aimless. There was nothing by which he could gauge his movements. It was night. The car seemed to hum. At the wheel, Jonathan yawned.

Benjamin was let off at the bottom of the driveway. It was easier for Jonathan this way — helluva thing to back around in, particularly at night. He slammed the door behind him. Goodnight Jonathan. The wheels spun in the dirt, then caught hold in a jerk. So long Jonathan! You're a fine man, you are. Have to learn though, we all have to learn. It's a bitch of a thing, this learning. You bear it and turn to gold like some Buddha statue. I suppose eventually that can happen. I would settle for a touch of Whitman in my veins, and grow a long beard into an old age. That would do. (But one mustn't spend his nights sucking off dead heroes; there is no energy in their

touch, and Oliver is dead, and I am not.) But never like a Pope or some other *pious piece of pumperknicle!* Nicely coined phrase. Repeat it once — *pious pile of defiled dinosaur dung* — even better. A nice ring to it, and silly. Ah, learning the hard way; we're all told that it's the only way to *really* learn. That's not so, is it? Goddamned grim world if it is, though there seems to be truth in it. Look around, look around.

Benjamin sauntered up the driveway, loose dirt dry and dusting his shoes, enough starlight to fathom the gaping ruts, black holes, at night they have no bottom. Amazing how useless these wonderful eyes can be once the sun sets. The ancients must have had better eyes. Just to survive, the primitive eyes for the hunt, some say better *third* eyes, a kind of intuition was all that got them through — so as not to fall in damned ruts, a fellow could twist an ankle! I guess one can either bear it, or have it tear them down. A shrawl on the wall falling like an avalanche to the floor, so went the psychological superstructure of our hero, Benjamin Gregory, twenty-five years and two root canals already under his belt; and ready for more? A shawl on the wall — nice bit of poetry. I'm creative as hell when I'm drunk. That's why they all drank like sailors, all of the great ones that is, a few exceptions, but just a few. A century of creative drunkenness. Such things can't last. Hemingway blew his brains out in Idaho. Virginia Woolf only drank cocoa — but did it make her better or worse, that is the question? (She didn't blow her brains out in Idaho!) Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. . . or curl up in the garage and put down the door, turn on the car and sear your hungry tongue on the exhaust pipe. Like a penis. Some serious literary sonuvabitch would ambush with some parallel or other. Pick a parallel — "how ironic!" he'd exclaim, sex and death, death and sex, that tasty seed and bringer of life, that instrument of death. A world of pencil-headed, pessimistic literati. It need not be so confusing; it's very simple really. Let me put it this way — no, let me put it that way. What I mean is, Benjamin, does everything have to be so strenuous to learn, just to learn? The first time, I remember throbbing down there for hours (shit!) before we offered each other, an inevitable offering, but long awaited and well received. It was exciting, we were both so new, and her cunt was swallowing me, and sinking back, and rushing around me with a wet heat like. . . I was pushing in. I remember, and touching a new world, the universe of the womb. She tasted like salt, sweat around her ears on a warm night; she was soft against me and moving like muscular water. I remember. Was that so fucking hard? Not such agony, now was it? No sir, not a bit. And don't tell me 'I didn't learn anything!' Just loveliness and pleasant things. That was Katherine. She was the first (years have gone since) and she is the last.

The lights from the downstairs room shone out on the grass. There was an owl in the trees behind the garden. The window cast a bowl of fading light,

making a circle into the dark, leaving the back of the house in black silhouette. The owl fell silent.

Benjamin stopped in the driveway like an animal. The moon shone a colorless light across the field, icing the leaves and rows of tomatoes, making smattered points of light along the ground. The night had a look and a smell. The moon was full; Benjamin had a shadow.

The window-light looked orange, depressed, unrefined. Gazing toward the house, looking for movement, for a sound, there was only that same stillness, as if there were no one there. But she was waiting for him. They would watch the television and talk, or go to bed where she would lie in awful silence. Was there no end to this? Ah, but the moon, not a cloud in the black night sky, an unfettered life, a silent, self-contained life.

Benjamin sat, crossed his legs, and sucked in a slow, deep breath. He could feel the wine leaving his blood and filling his bladder. He looked briefly to the house. Then back toward the garden. The owl hooted. Again. Again.

Elves and fairies — it was a night for such strange creatures, a dance 'round the garden by the light of the full summer moon or some goddamn thing. Any elves among you? He surveyed the quiet scene. Not a movement, even in the mind (for a moment) not a breeze.

From the high grasses standing back behind the garden's nearest corner came the eyes. Burning emerald, watchful, alone. The grass moved and made a rustle.

Carefully Benjamin whistled in a tentative, quivering, soothing kind of call. Cats cannot bear shrieking whistles or high-pitched sounds — that is a known fact. The scientology of the sensitive feline ear. They hate squeals and love bass guitar, and blues singers with those low foghorn voices.

"Hey, Sakyamuni" he whispered, "come here pussycat, come here baby."

Sakyamuni blinked out of the darkness. Cats are like furry sphinxes. Katherine thought he sat on the arm of a chair like a buddha, so they called him Sakyamuni.

"Sakya," he breathed, the hiss of a snake. That will scare him off. The cat's no trooper. "Come here pussy."

The emerald eyes lumbered forward. Oh, I love my pussy, my Sakyamuni — now there's a strange word. Pussy. Why would they call a cunt a pussy. It's warm and soft etcetera like a pussycat, and sort of furry, and alive; but so are a lot of things. A puppy. "He thrust his aching cock like a wild locomotive into her anxious and steaming puppy." No, that won't do at all. It must be the feline quality, the aloof femaleness of the thing. Nothing aloof about a woman's genitals, no sirree. It hasn't any class that one can see, "except claws in the minds of the weak and the damned, retracted and out of sight." Now I sound like a Christian. Title for a good Christian science fiction thriller, directed by the Pope, the Virgin Mary called in as technical advisor: "The

Woman That Ate Chapel Hill, North Carolina." Females and monsters from Mars. And not only that, but it hasn't any sort of rough tongue to it like a cat. It is self-cleaning like a cat — here Sakya, come on. Aha! A hunter it is, stalking in the night, hunting the penises of men like mice in the grass and making them squeal. Another case closed, the puzzle solved. The pussy perplex.

Katherine moved past the window, a mere shadow, into the kitchen. She was singing a song that Benjamin could not quite make out, the words coming to him in a thin voice from far away. It sounded queer. Katherine, here I come, I guess. If I'm ready; but I wait — and why?

It's a beautiful night! Indeed it is. The moon is full. My cat nudges my knee with his cheek. Prrrrrrr, he says. Prrrrrrrrrr-rr!

Sakyamuni, black fur with a blue night-lustre, soft to the touch, fell languidly upon his cat-back and flopped lazily on his side, nose in the grass and eyes watching the blades for motion. Bored with this he rose and walked to Benjamin's other side, where he lay on his stomach. Variety is the spice of life. His tail twitched.

Benjamin petted him between the ears and on his whiskers. Because it was what Sakyamuni seemed to enjoy most. Licking his paw now. Clean out the grit, polish the nails, how's that? A little more — fine. He looked up at Benjamin with a drugged expression — aren't you going to pet me under my chin and behind my head? Blink, blink.

"Of course I am," said Benjamin, startling the hell out of himself. But you're supposed to be out eating beasts that eat my garden. Like rabbits. Now listen for the crunching of criminal rabbits, always feasting and reaping my harvest — damned rabbits! Now Sakya, be like Elmer Fudd on the cartoon; say "Awight wabbit! Paws in the air, ears against the wall, wabbit!"

But none tonight. He had seen them a few times, ten of them under the moon once, in the winter on the hard ground. They had been hungry, you could tell: skinny ears, poorly executed hopping.

I think I could turn and live with the animals, says the poem. Turn away from men and this crazy mind we all share.

To survive means to adapt. Adaptability and resignation — animals know these things. Sakyamuni, you're my beautiful cat and my lover of poems. Do you respect me as much as I respect you?

A flick of the tail, a nuzzling head upon the grass; then a bolting off upon some shadow, frightening. And a slow return. A roll upon the cool earth. One just can't explain it. It can't be explained. But I'm not ready to be ground into clay to be picked like snot from some stranger's boot sole. "To return to the grass that I love," he says. That's right, the animals can do that. Adaptable. Cat one day, dirt the next. It's all a matter, in the end, of knowing how to die. It is a learned skill, like shuffleboard. The most important thing

you'll ever do, Benjamin, and you're going to fuck it up. I'm hungry. I make a good omelet, better than average. Dying, I don't know. Dying should be easier. No need to go to the grocery for eggs, tomatoes, ham, onions, butter, a pack of cigarettes (while I'm here I might as well) in order to die. You just *do it*. Bitch of a thing. Every change is like a death. Life is a practising. Changes, Sakyamuni — lots of changes. It's the way of the world, and wonderful — right? But a bit frightening. I'm not ready to be made into fertilizer for the vegetable population. Love vegetables, but for me to eat *them*, dig? Everything in its time. I'll be ready when it's time. Yes. And worst of all, living is a thousand times harder than dying, I believe. Living properly, that is. That's a sobering thought that ten bottles of bordeaux won't placate.

Benjamin stood and slung the limp cat upon his shoulder where it perched, surprised. The sounds of crickets filled the empty night.

— You look very beautiful — he had said, her fragile arm making a V, her hand resting then beneath her cheek upon the pillow, sheets pulled to her waist and her smooth back, her warmth rising out of the bed. Lovely. But then her neck arched, her eyes pulled to slits and looking at him, and a grimace on her painful face from something awful, he didn't know. Why are you looking at me, he had wondered; can't I even. . . ? — You never say things like that — she had said. Nasty tone, my heart sinking, can feel it falling, my eyes burning. But I think them all the time, don't you know that. Her eyes closed, her head returned to her hand. He was sitting alone then on the lonely bed. It had never been a lonely bed. Weeks, only weeks since. . . . What the hell is wrong with you, this cold-edged bitchiness suddenly? — That was very unkind — he had said, quietly. Leaning forward to rise, he had paused. There had been that silence. — I really meant it — he had said; and then he had said — fuck you — and gone somberly to turn out the light as she worked hard at sleep.

A chilling look behind the eyes. There had never been ugliness before.

Ah well, hip hip — one must endure and not let it get beyond you. We'll work it all out, no problem really, so she tells me. Some positive action is needed here, a talking it over, if she'll talk; my lady is a shell. Yes. It will all, in the end, come to good, if we only let it.

Inside we go Sakyamuni. I'll whistle a casual tune, one that she likes, just as I step through the door. It will make her happy to see me, yes it will. She will be happy to see me, and I love you Sakyamuni (watch the claws), and I love you Katherine most of all. But I can't tell you; you won't let me, with your face and that thing behind your eyes that festers sometimes, that I can't bear to have turned on me. But I love you, Katie. You will love me too. Someday I will tell you about it.

"Come over here." She called to him over her shoulder. She was stirring iced tea in a pitcher at the counter. One light bulb had burned out overhead

and made the kitchen seem strange. Who was it that said sex was nothing but lighting?

He moved from the doorway and his sneakers squeaked. He rested his chin upon her shoulder and smelled Katherine's smell. It was familiar; it calmed him. But he was missing it more and more, watching the giant spoon whipping the tea and clanking against the glass.

"Does that look strong enough to you?" she asked. She glanced at him. She looked concerned.

"Damned hard to say. Perplexing. What do you think?"

"They say on the label here three packets for a quart, see?"

He removed his chin so that she could turn and show him the label.

She said, "But that's too thin, don't you think — too watery. I think another packet. I bought this stuff today, I was so thirsty after class. It was hot today, you know? My back was sticking to the seat and I had on my shorts and burned the back of my legs on the stupid upholstery. Why do they make cars with black insides? It's sadistic is what it is. I should write a letter to Detroit. Or put white sheets all over to sit on."

Benjamin held her shoulders from behind and planted a kiss on the back of her head. She was a babbler. Send a letter to Detroit. Fold it into an airplane and sail it out the window. That would be fine. Now let me hear the day in catalogue. I want to hear it, I truly do. Tonight I won't get bored, I promise.

Katherine turned and gave him a short hug. She played with a button on his shirtfront like a high school girl. "I'm sorry," she said, "did you do what you wanted tonight? Where were you anyway, you never did tell me."

"I went to visit Jonathan. He's been convincing himself that he's sick. He tells himself things until he believes them, things that he wants to believe. Lately it's been illness, very self-destructive these things. He worries me sometimes."

"Hmmm, that's it, huh?"

"Yeah, that's it: Jonathan got out of bed. I got drunk. That's it."

She frowned, a child pouting. She always liked to go out drinking with him. Then she thought better of it and grinned.

Benjamin grasped at it (her changing face) and said, "You wanted to come?"

"We-e-e-ell, no," she shook her head, "I had a fine time this afternoon."

Benjamin was stretching into the cabinet for two glasses. He set them on the counter and said, "It sounded like purgatory with all the heat and the burned legs and all that nasty...."

"You see, I bought iced tea and then I flaked out in the living room and I drank like a madman — and did my needlepoint. I'm almost finished."

Benjamin had poured two glasses. He plopped in ice cubes. Almost finished? Which pattern was this now — the Japanese tree, or the fellow with

the guitar? The iced tea looks a bit dark. "Let's get out of here," he said, "the light is driving me crazy."

"It just went out tonight, scared me when I flicked the switch — you know how they flash."

Benjamin sang, "'heart skipped a beat when I walked down the street, everybody I meet' — you know that song? It ends with a guy who's heart stops when he sees his old love and everybody stares at him on the sidewalk. An upbeat cheery tune to be whistled in the morning on the way to work, pick up your spirits."

She grinned and patted him rat-a-tat-tat on the back.

He was pleased with this.

They shuffled down the hall to the living room where he slumped cat-like into his soft chair with the padded armrests, and she sat on the floor beside him where he could reach down and touch her. He slipped his hand along her back lazily and played with the tiny muscles in her neck, beneath her hair. No meat on this little girl, I wonder if she's healthy, the way she eats.

He said, "Have you been taking those vitamin pills I bought for you?"

"Yeah. I've been eating much better at lunch — it's just been so hot honey. I really can't sometimes. I came home today and made a tunafish sandwich and iced tea, and a peach, which wasn't ripe — but it was good. That was all right, wasn't it? My stomach has just been so unsettled lately." She made a face.

"The heat, or a virus? Let me feel your head." He leaned across and placed his palm lightly on her forehead. "My hands are always cold," he said, "I can't tell. You feel all right now?"

"I'm fine."

He sipped at his tea. Cold in the throat, feel it rushing into the stomach. Excellent.

"How's your tea?" he asked. She was looking into her glass.

She thought a moment, and tasted again, then smacked her lips and said, "A little strong."

"A little," he agreed.

"Oh well."

"What the fuck."

"I can always add water. I drank a pitcher already today," she whispered, "I've been peeing all day," and Benjamin laughed out loud. He gulped his tea and rested his eyes upon the ceiling where the shadows gathered in the corners so comfortably.

My life is not so old, he thought. There is much to be done yet; but it is old enough. I know more than I read. In the newspaper. That's how old. But I grow lazy. I know this neck too well, the feel of this fine hair. It's like my own. But what difference, really? And for how long? Much behind me, and

much ahead — and I grow tired and timid resting in my chair, the night easing on, and Katherine.

And the tea is good — I like it strong.

He told her that he liked it strong.

She cocked her head against the chair and rested her eyes, her green and living eyes. “Do you remember my telling you about Julia?” she said, “my little Chinese girl with the obnoxious mother. . . .”

“Who always comes in before class and tells you how to teach — yes, I remember. Sounds like a sticky situation. Stage mother syndrome — a plague upon them,” he said. His words came slowly, mildly.

“Well, she was the first student I had, really marvelous, and I liked her so much too. She was sweet. What a body! She could do amazing things, very technical and difficult, and could learn them so quickly. Effortless. I really wanted to work with her. She was special.” Katie fell silent, as if her story had finished itself.

Benjamin waited. Then he asked, “And? Did she leave or something?”

“Oh! I forgot,” Katherine laughed, “she broke her leg.”

Benjamin peered at her as she blushed, shaking his head.

“Sorry about that,” said Katie, “she broke her leg. She worked *so* hard and finally had decided to study seriously, and then — boy, how could I leave out the most important part?” She was smiling.

“I don’t know, kid.” He started to belch and nearly vomited.

Jesus, but she seemed to be suffering from. . . hypertension?

Benjamin took a long pull on his tea, finishing it, and said, “Aaaah,” as the glass tapped upon the table top. “You know, that reminds me of something I read in the paper today,” he said. An awful story, this that he was about to tell. A tragedy it was, but then it was funny too, and damned amusing. Strange how humor heals all wounds for those left behind. He started telling. “You see, there was this insurance salesman from Sweden, I mean *in* Sweden (or was it Denmark?) and he decided that life was not worth living so he took his phone off the. . . .”

“What the hell, Benjy — this sounds terrible. Don’t you know a happy story. You see, Julia. . . .”

“Quiet now, pay attention. This makes sense.” He kicked off his sneakers. “So, where was I — that’s right; he locked himself in his room and opened up all the gas outlets and lay down on his bed and waited for the angels to flutter down from wherever to lead him off to the big premium or something in the sky. Yes, well — as it turns out (and I couldn’t even believe this myself) the government had started using, by law, a non-toxic gas, because the Swedes kill themselves pretty much whenever they feel like it. So it must have been in Sweden. Did you know that about the Swedes?”

“What about them?”

"Very high suicide rate."

"I wonder why," she said.

"Because the women are beautiful, but as inaccessible as goat crags, and all the men go mad and string themselves up. Very simple."

Her lips tightened. Through her teeth she said, "What about the women who kill themselves?"

There was an aching silence.

"Loneliness," he said, and she almost laughed.

Then he resumed his story. "So he waited and waited there on his bed, the poor fellow, but not a damned thing happened. He even took deep breaths. Some speculate that he wrote and revised over a dozen original suicide notes, though this can't be proved."

"Why not? Hurry up. You throw more bullshit into a story than anybody in the world, Benjamin." She was playing. Her anger had come and gone like a brief and slippery breeze.

"Well, I guess he took his inability to do away with himself as a sign from you know where, and underwent some sort of existential revelation and was filled with a new will to live. He turned off the gas. Then he lay back down on his bed and lit up a cigar — to celebrate." Benjamin stopped. His story was over.

"So?" she said.

"So?!" he said, incredulous.

"Ohhh," she said in a sinking voice. "Oh my."

"The whole house blew up like a bomb," he concluded.

"Then how did they know about the dozens of suicide notes and all that, huh?"

"I made that part up. The rest is true. In black and white, yessir."

"Poor man," Katherine said; then she looked up at him. "So?" she asked again.

"So? Well, so, he was ready to take life by the balls, be the biggest goddamned insurance agent in Sweden, and poor Julia was ready to take life by . . ."

"Not by the balls I hope."

"She's too young. By the leotards. But she broke her leg — See?" Benjamin grinned, the leotards; that amused him.

"By the leotards? You're crazy, Benjamin." She watched him and then smiled. She seemed in a good mood tonight. "Oh honey," she said. She looked away. The smile fell away.

"What?" he said.

"Nothing," she said, and they were silent.

But there was something, there was something. What is it, Kate? The silence is growing louder, and we're on new ground. This is real. Say

something. Tell me what it is.

Katherine's fingers moved; she had a self-conscious interest in the rug. She picked at it, feeling his eyes pressing on her. Here we are, she thought; now what was she to do? Sit uncomfortably. Bear it. Oh Benjamin, dammit.

Benjamin thought it was time to talk. Her arm was slender and pale as he watched it, touching her shoulder with his calm hand laid open, gently resting.

Benjamin slid onto the floor beside her. He gave her a tentative kiss on the forehead, and as he moved away she nodded to it's gentleness, yes I know how you are, Benjamin, and how you love me I can hear it in your voice and feel it in everything you touch, and I know, yes I do, dear God I know. She held to his arm with both hands and kissed his shoulder and then put her head there.

They waited.

"You know," he said quietly, "we haven't made love in nearly three weeks. Do you remember when we used to make love every day. Goddamn, we were good. What do you think, baby?"

"I know. I'm sorry. I really am."

"Why are you sorry. It's not your fault. It's us. He watched her. Her head was down. She squeezed his arm, and he felt her tension passing through him.

"I know, but I'm sorry," she said. "We can work it all out. It isn't anything really, is it?" Her eyes turned to him. They were asking.

"I don't know. I thought we should talk."

"It'll be fine, honey. And don't worry, please. It'll straighten itself all out. It's just been a bad time for both of us. Hasn't it?"

"I suppose," he said, not sure. "But listen. I love you baby."

"Yes," she said.

"You're everything to me, honey. You know that. I don't like this staleness. He was saying too much, he knew.

"Don't say that," she said.

"Say what?"

"That 'live without me' stuff, that — you know that's not true. Don't say it. It's dumb. You've said so yourself."

"That's how I feel lately. Goddammit, I'm fed up with this shit." His eyes questioned her hard stare. A puzzle. "What's wrong?"

"You say things, Benjy. You would do fine, I know you would do fine."

"I wouldn't do fine. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"You would. And I'm tired of this," she said, and that was all.

She had done it again. His stomach groaned. His eyes sank and they were silent again. They sat long and lonely. He could feel the time growing monstrous between them. Dammit Katherine, you're an awful cutting chaos;

you bleed me with your crazy eyes. You were back with me for an hour, Katie, back again in the warm place, but it passed away like the rest. We watched it, not knowing. Did you know? But we were back, let no man deny it, my dear Katherine, set adrift in our living room, drifting.

The air was malignant again.

"I'm tired," he said, and he climbed the stairs to the bedroom; and she followed quietly at his heels, yet a thousand miles at sea. What did she want, and need? The confusion in her eyes, looking everywhere but to Benjamin.

He stripped and wrapped a towel around his waist before moving toward the bathroom. She was upon the bed, on the edge, sitting like a guilty child.

"Are you going for a shower?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "Come with me." Stupid. Why had he said that? A habit. A memory. Because he had to.

"Well," she said, "if you want me to." Her passive hands resting in her lap. Her passive eyes cast down. Their bedroom was a graveyard.

"That's all right," he said, and he paused at the door. A sad examination of his curled toes. Toenails a bit long, time for a trim. The sadness lingering in the doorway.

She said, "I'm awfully tired too, honey. I may just be asleep when you come back. Kiss me goodnight when you come to bed, okay? Tell me goodnight. Please."

"I will, baby," he said.

"Promise?"

"Yes, I promise." Their eyes met for the first time, and hers scarcely flinched, taking him warmly across the room.

"I miss you honey," she said, "I do."

"I know." He moved slowly into the bathroom. The door clicked shut behind him, and the space was empty again. And for some reason he thought of waking the next morning in their bed, together in the mingling of their bitter breath.

What is it, Kate? What is it you are trying so hard to kill in me? Tell me, now.

Oh nothing, nothing, really nothing. He dropped his towel and set the water running, steaming already from the cold tiles. Yes, a nice hot shower, his body shivering now, would set him right.

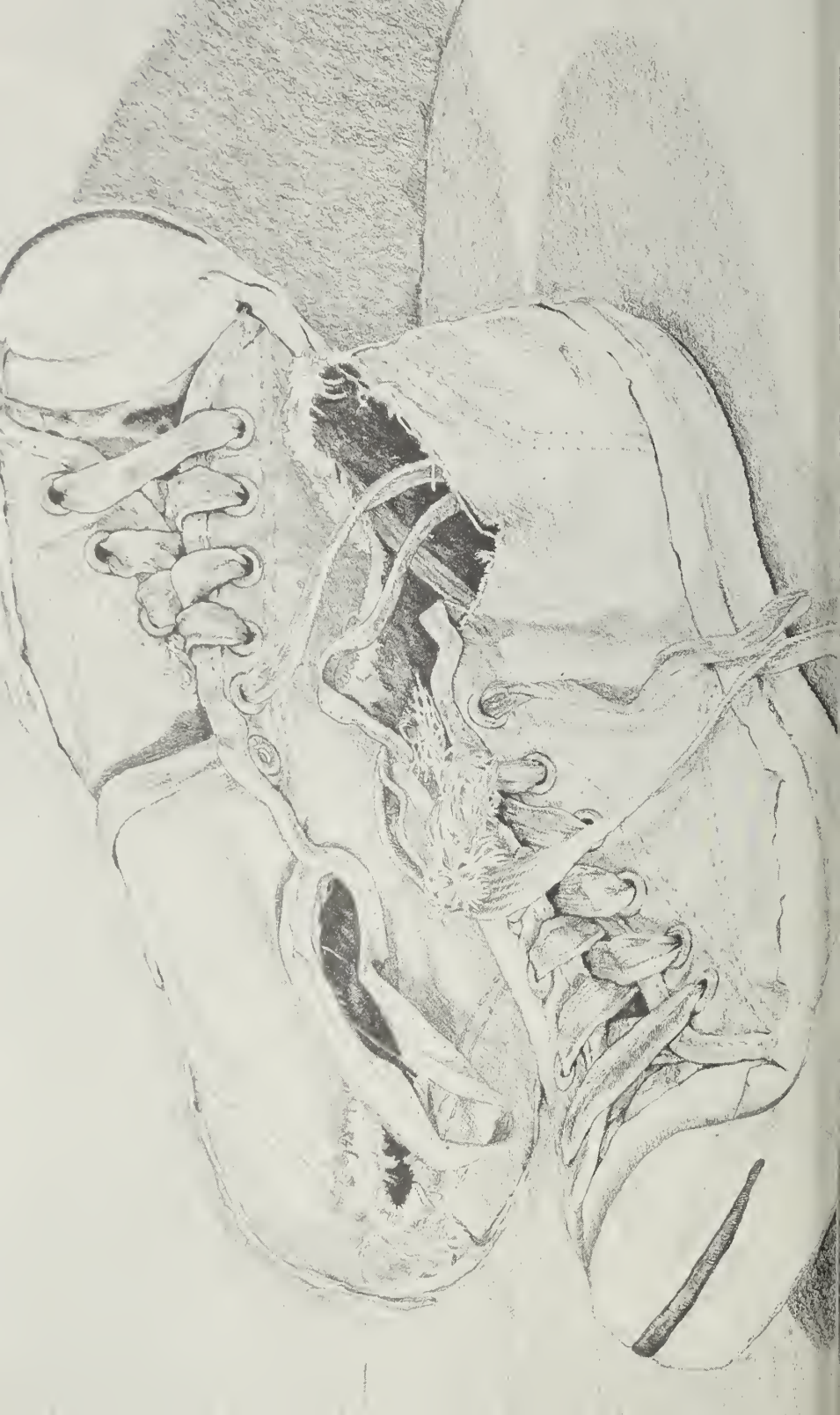
The Words of Yattiehoe Delivered In the Third Year of Eisenhower

that year I went down to the show to see
the four-legged morphodite it cost
four bits to git in and it was
nekked to the waist and looked like
half of a man and half of a woman run together
one side was all muscled and hairy
and one side creamy and smooth and the biggest boob
I ever saw on a woman and half the hair on its head
was long and the other half was short but then I reckon
anybody could do that and then we paid
four more bits to see it below the waist
my God. I said to uncle Billy but when I
turned to look at him he was blanched
white as those lizards they find
in the bottom of Dillard's cave and then
I thought of something I couldn't quite git
and thought about it a week and then
it hit me what it was Jericho

that city the jews marched around a week or two
blowing their horns and then the walls fell down
killing the women and children I thought
what it must have looked like after all those bodies
broken up and jumbled together and then I thought
when they git resurrected will they be
all mixed up three-legged men and two-headed women
and four-legged morphodites. I asked uncle Billy
he didn't know but then started saying
this world was a four-legged Morphodite
wicked and good all mixed together but the preacher
he was astanding there and he started shaking and says
God's almighty hand it moves in mysterical ways
his years ain't numbered and the next year
they had a fat man in the show and the world was tattooed on his be / a
when I saw him I thought
this world is like a big pimple
ready to be stuck with a pin and
I been praying ever since praying
morning and night. and thinking about
the resurrection amen

So Rudely Forced

I showed you my fireflies last night,
Glowing inside their jar,
Burning themselves fiercely with their own hot light –
You whispered, “We all are.”
You asked me to show you the place
Where I hunted my prey:
It was dark, so dark I could not see your face,
But I still found the way.
I led you through the trees and tall grass
To where the pale stars flew,
But you were not content, you shattered the glass
And the sharp edge cut you. . .
Fire and blood went spiralling high
As I stood there entranced,
As all across a thunderous, swollen sky
The blood-red bright stars danced.



Au Clair de la Lune

As I write this I have in mind a character, both audience and (vaguely) subject of this essay, a person who lives and a character I am slowly creating: a woman, because I find men less interesting to write about, and because she is a woman. Person and character, audience and subject: by this you may see a motif of this *essai*: duality; and duality repeated.

II.

It is an essay, a literary tract, a preparation for memoirs. The tone is a little sentimental, because I write under the influence of the moon.

III.

There are two moons: the moon of the Romantic sensibility and the moon of the telescope and the astronaut. The first moon is my muse, and is a dead moon: killed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by the discovery that it was composed of matter (of "earth"), and so subject to mundane, mathematical law, it was revived in the early nineteenth century by the Romantics: an exhumed corpse they tried to breathe some life into: the muse I keep is a dead child on display.

A fundamental duality of life is night and day, moon and sun. But in this essay I insist on repeated dualities; and it is here necessary because of the scientific revolution. Once upon a time, the moon-sun dichotomy held, and under it could be ranged such categories as subject and object, faith and reason. But the objective, the rational and the daily have become so bright that the moon itself has become divided: no longer one moon, but two: the moon of poetry, and the moon of fact; the moon of subjectivity, and the moon of objectivity; the moon of night and the moon of day; in short, the moon of the moon and the moon of the sun — duality upon duality: and how weak is the moon of the moon by the light of day.

Tonight, as I conceive this essay, the moon is at the gibbous, and waning (it rose late), and my heart is troubled — I am lunatic: not indeed because of what I can see (the artificial day of the city shrinks the moon to a skull, its light to a fiction) but because I remember the full moon of the country. All memory is of the moon, fictional, as is all history because, despite our pretensions at science, we see the past only under (at best) a gibbous light. These troubles of the heart, provoked by the moon's memory, might have led me to murder or rape but will lead, instead, to the last safe activity for a moonman: writing.

IV.

St. Augustine

strutted and crowed and lorded it over Scottville ridge,
raising big women from straw-thin ticks
to puff and shiver and pump

tin-hard water
 in bent tin-buckets
 and fetch in the day

while John and the Loggin's boys
 cursed the old bird and crept in the back
 smelling of fish, of fire,
 of Bull-of-the-Woods —
 sweet smells of the night river.

In this small poem and its one sentence I have crammed both sun and moon: the universe spread through twelve short lines (for "dark" and "light" and possibly only "light" would contain it). But the poem is, like all poetry, lunar, casting a dim light on reality: for Scottville is a reality. It lies three hours west of Durham, and may be read about in the *North Carolina Gazetteer*: 2950 feet above sea-level, it is situated on the Ashe and Alleghany county lines, not far from the New River. It was settled in 1830 as Flint Hill (saith the gazetteer), received its now defunct post office in 1855 under the name of Scottville, and saw my father grow up: a fact overlooked by the gazetteer. Scottville lies on highway 221, an old, winding, crown-paved road, as independent as a Democrat, and on secondary road #1327, once known romantically as the Devil's Highway when it was the main route from that part of the country to Mouth of Wilson, Virginia. There are also traces of the Ore Road, so-called copper ore from the hills above the New River to smelters at Ore Knob. Thus, with my additions, the gazetteer; but notice how this solar source in its solar style appropriates the past, as if one could know the past. But the poem, akin to memory, embodies the past, and changes it as it will, because moonlight changes things, and because memory, as it lives, must grow.

The Scottville of the poem is not, in many respects, like the real (that is, the geographic) Scottville: no one in the real Scottville would ever have to pump water out of the ground: it flows out of its own free will. A circle of a half-mile radius with the old Scottville church and schoolhouse at its center would likely include a half-dozen substantial springs. Indeed, Sparta, the seat of Alleghany County, still relies on local springs for its water and is the only town remaining in North Carolina which does not (and need not) filter its water. Despite this, I can reliably report that the women who inhabit the poem do pump water out of the ground: they have, in fact, never done anything else; so that, one may say, though the sun is in their buckets, they have yet to bring it home.

The Scottville of the present, then, belongs to the sun, to its inhabitants, and to the tourist: I have been there as tourist, the sun shone brightly, it was

a pleasant day, but I saw nothing. I went again with my father and he, eclipsing the light of day with the shadow of memory, made me see:

We stood on the banks of the New River below Scottville, and admired a creek as it fell seventy-five feet down sheer rock into the river. There was not much water — it was a dry summer (the sun had been hot), but as he spoke, the water grew in volume, it spread over the rock, it froze white and glinted in the moon.

We stood on a hill above the river, looked down a steep hollow, and saw a house spring from the seed of hand-forged nails that lay there; we saw the blacksmith leap from the heart of an anvil, and throw his hammer at passers-by where now there are trees standing. Nat Moxley was a dangerous man, and half-crazy: he would climb the ridges above his house every morning, and crow: he had stood in the sun too long, and now he welcomed it; but the moon has welcomed him.

Nowadays we see by the moon but occasionally. But in those days, they read by the moon. My father's father, born to a hard fact (his illegitimacy), spent his life making all facts hard; though he was as solar and mean as any man in Scottville (St. Augustine is in part his, and Nat's, symbol), he once saw the moonlit image of the long-dead Rev. Billy Fawkes in broad daylight. He was afraid of the dark and of being alone (and presumably of the moon) ever after; but he never lost his solar hardness. He was afraid of the moon, but, as a fastball pitcher (the best that Scottville ever fielded) specializing in the brushback and the beanball, he made a great many others see stars; they also saw red, but Elbert could handle himself in a fight. (He was, in fact, the one man unafraid of Nat Moxley, and used to oblige the neighbors by taking their work to him.) He is dead now; but he was such a hard fact, such a sunspot on reality, that I find myself quite often thinking of him as alive. Though he suffered a great deal from asthma, high blood pressure, and self-pity, and though he dropped dead (as if in a hurry), and indeed spent the end of his life ignoring his doctor's advice, I am sure he did not welcome the moon.

But Sally would welcome the moon, if it would come. It came twice, with insanity, to pluck her from the sun; once, in her youth (not long after she married Elbert) on a night of death and darkness, it brought her down a mountain. But now she sits in the cheerfulness of a rest home, lucid only by morning, when the sun is cool.

Sally is in the poem — one of the women who bring in the day. She is of the moon, and figures in all my poems, yet, by some fate of matter or time, she brought in the sun till the moon drove it out. I often stayed with her when I was a child; I was her "legs" because sun and water had got in her joints, and made arthritis. We made strawberry jam together, and cooked together, and played together, and, in the tired night, we slept together,

under the moon; but always there was a sharp ticking clock with bright green hands and poised alarm. I write this now at night, a thin ticking in my ears. Where is the moon?

My father is John, half-moon and half-sun. He grew one horn out of each, and blew on both as hard as he could; and here am I: my mother is Hope.

V.

I rise with the moon to write, fifty minutes later each day. I disappear at sundown with the new.

The moon knows 28 phases, 28 paragraphs — this is perfection: or two sonnets, perfection on perfection. But though I write by the moon, I must live by the sun — sickness, examinations, and you, tender critics, who always read by the sun and feed by the moon like seely sheep. Your powerful concave minds, focussed intently on a word, burn holes in the page, and singe your fingers. Read this by the moon but not drunk: wine and weeds are made by the sun.

VI.

This was a waking dream: my body in ecstasy, my mind calmly considered a yellow man in a green field.

He played a guitar, or a flute — I could not rightly tell — with perfect serenity, nearly motionless;

his back was toward me, I saw his arm extended on his instrument, and only that arm moved.

How could his heart be still, at his command, under a troubled moon?

VII.

My heart will not be stilled, half-woman and half-fiction whom I address; it would not be still the night you smiled, and trembled, and asked me to be serious; for that was a bright night, I shouted and laughed and rejoiced in the moon and the moon's troubles. And you meant: Be religious. There is no religion by the sun or under the sun in the twentieth century. We may tell it secretly, slyly, troubled at the thought like a lunatic under his moon; rejoice; be fools; but there is no seriousness possible. We are the true abnormal — the intellectuals and madmen of the century. We see by the moon (the moon is our sun).

The dead who have returned report this: there is a light (it blinds, but does not hurt the eyes, like a full moon after darkness), and it speaks to them kindly as they float from their bodies and long to depart.

He plays upon his flute.

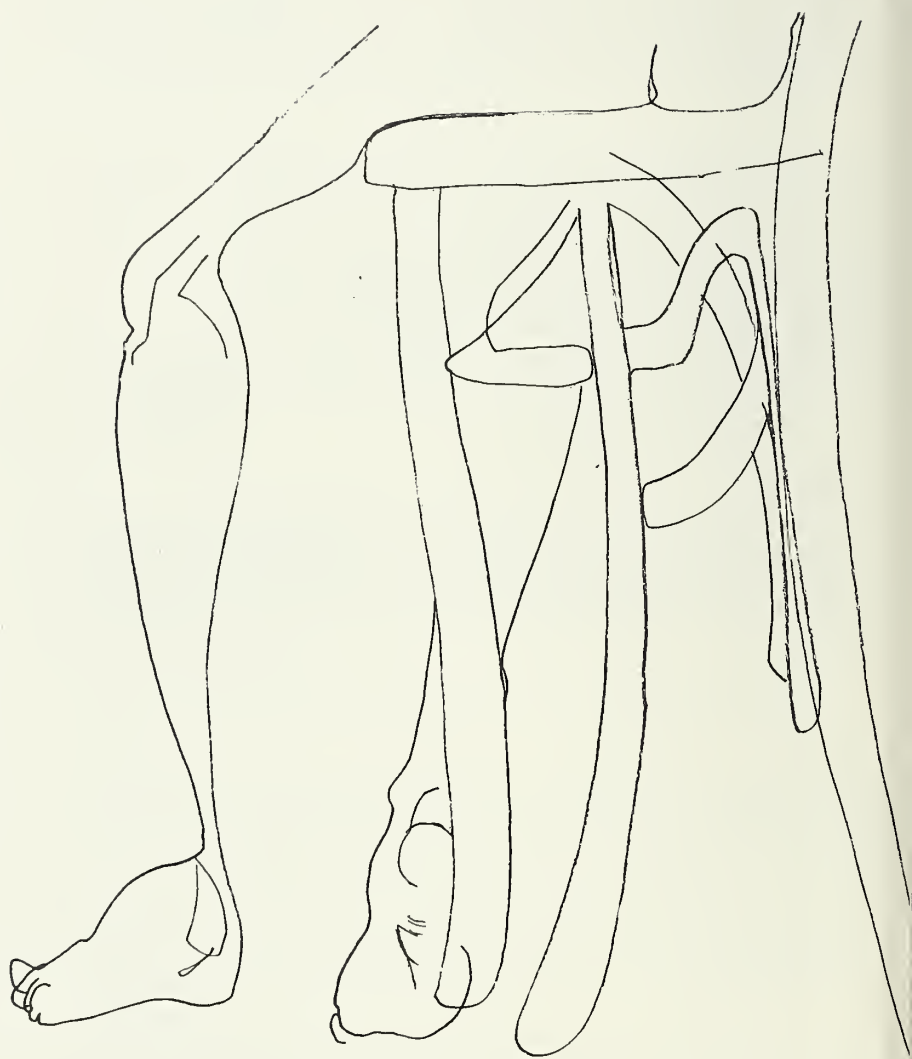
Souls, like dancing leaves, delight in his song.

(The last paragraph is yours.)

Winning Stream

Mouths back in time, sworn to each other till the end of the stars
breathless now in mind and re-mind
taste both our day-eyed tears.
Love, like tomorrow, when you called to me
you did not use my name,
and so the stars end once today
in the pale blue blank of daylight.
Now in a feint and lowly ordered time
of starless stars and no re-mind
on the various brown of access
even the sky is blue.

We jarred bees on cool bright mornings before dinner.
We painted their hives white in the cut-grass orchard every May.
Like this and spring a promise fails to mention many injuries.
Our families both have graveyards on the surface of the earth.



Drowned By the Old Maelstrom

little white fish with long, whippy tails
grasped firmly in hand
snelled to hooks to terminal gear —
weights, line, more snells, more hooks.
whippy and slippery
like my pale cousin
who rarely comes out
but is active at night.
little piddling nightfish that they are
lie like engorged and sated bulls,
like crystal carved goats —
fine and syrupy in the air

My cousin often stirs
and stands like wood at my thighs
in my sleep when I crouch alone.
He is so clever, so thin and lank
standing with his bulbous feet
and humorous top-knot (styled unlike most others)
which, catching the light, looks pink
while glistening with that whitish almost grin.
We often go fishing with each other
snelled to the end of our lines
to hooks, to terminal tackle
and (finely) finally to
little white fish with long, whippy tails
(that look so like syrup in the air).

The God of Unachieved Desire: Remarks on erotic feeling and style in Swinburne

In a critical introduction to the recent (1973) Faber selection of Swinburne's verse, Robert Nye takes the opportunity to endorse wholeheartedly certain remarks made by T.S. Eliot in his 1920 essay "Swinburne as Poet." And if, in fact, Nye's entire introduction seems anxious to concern itself more with Eliot's observations on Swinburne than Swinburne himself, this is something that has become familiar: in certain quarters criticism still seems not so much to evolve upon the basis of Eliot's judgements on poetry and poets as to devolve from them. Eliot himself would have insisted that every age must reinterpret poetry for itself: when we find that his views on a particular poet still seem "almost wholly cogent" to an editor and critic writing fifty years later, we are entitled to suspect, on Eliot's own principle, that there is something wrong. In the case of Swinburne, however, the issue is more crucial than just another example of posthumous apple-polishing for Mr. Eliot: not only has much of Swinburne's work been out of print for so long, but since Eliot's essay it has received almost no critical attention. Swinburne remains the most ignored of the great English poets, and Eliot's essay and the attitude to Swinburne's poetry evinced in it has had a lot to do with that. Yet it seems to me that Eliot's critique of Swinburne fails (if not ingeniously declines) to engage itself with at least one crucial aspect of the verse.

One of Eliot's most basic judgements of Swinburne is concerned with the question of Meaning. He is explicit:

None of the obvious complaints that were or might have been brought to bear upon the first *Poems and Ballads* holds good. The poetry is not morbid, it is not erotic, it is not destructive. These are adjectives which can be applied to the material, the human feelings, which in Swinburne's case do not exist. The morbidity is not of human feeling but of language. Language in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that the two are identified.

They are identified in the verse of Swinburne solely because the object has ceased to exist, because the meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning, because language, uprooted, has adapted itself to an independent life of atmospheric nourishment. . .

. . . Only a man of genius could dwell so exclusively and consistently among words as Swinburne. His language is not, like the language of bad poetry, dead. But the language which is important to us is that which is

struggling to digest and express new objects, new groups of objects, new feelings, new aspects. . .

First, it's necessary to comment on Eliot's remarks on the absence of erotic feeling in Swinburne's verse. Nye's concurrence with this view is total, and he italicizes specifically the statement "The morbidity is not of human feeling but of language," and adds himself: "This is precise, and presents us with a critical point of view from which it is possible to view an unpopular poet without prejudice."

Now the simple thing that needs to be said here is that a critic *ought*, in fact, to be able to view any poet or any poem, unpopular or otherwise, without prejudice, and without the ingenious necessity of mentally constructing (let alone being "presented" with) a single viewpoint from which it is "possible" to do so: the necessity of such a construction, which Nye's sentence somehow admits, serves only to confirm the existence of the prejudice and merely conceals it under the carpet instead of surpassing it. Nye states that Eliot's judgement on this is "precise"; it seems to me, in fact, to be overnice, and in both possible senses of that word. Eliot seems anxious to clear Swinburne's verse of the charges of blasphemy and impropriety directed against it by its contemporary critics; he too, like Nye, is searching for an area of critical ground from which he can (in carefully qualified terms) praise Swinburne's poetry and justify its preservation, while simultaneously vindicating his own appreciation of it or that of the reader. While deprecating Swinburne's Victorian critics, he preserves their prejudices. Certainly Swinburne himself, who delighted in the outrage his poems occasioned, would have been disappointed at the measured coolness of Eliot's reaction. But of course he would have seen that this coolness was merely an evasion. Beneath Eliot's unembarrassed, businesslike dismissal of the entire problem of eroticism in Swinburne there lies, as so often in Eliot's own life and his poetry, only another, deeper level of embarrassment.

And, at this point, the obvious again needs to be stated: certain of Swinburne's poems *are* "morbid," they *are* "erotic;" I do not quite understand how poetry may be "destructive," which is Eliot's third adjective, but if it were possible they would be that too. And these are all adjectives which *can* be applied to "the material, the human feelings," as a correlation of certain tendencies expressed in the poems with aspects of the poet's biography will bear out. In Swinburne, the emotions in and behind the poems do and did exist, and there is no point in conniving at the fact. In fact these emotions are often, and probably as much as is ever so in good poetry, the matrix out of which certain poems are shaped and delivered. In some of Swinburne's poems, the sheer pressure of the "morbid" emotion enacted in the verse is one of its distinctive characteristics. A critical position which insists that "Anactoria" or "Dolores," for example, are not

emotionally and, let us say it, sexually morbid in some sense attempts to make Swinburne other than he is as a poet, as well as other than he was as a man. And if these are poems which are paradigmatic of this aspect of Swinburne, they are nevertheless typical, and we recognize them as typical for reasons other than those merely of language. The problem for the modern critic of Swinburne is to explain the relationship that obtains *between* the emotion and the language, and not to act as if either one or other of these did not exist, as so many apologists or prudes, respectively, have done. The present essay will make some attempts in this direction.

The following lines are from "Anactoria:"

I would my love could kill thee; I am satiated
 With seeing thee live, and fain would have thee dead.
 I would earth had thy body as fruit to eat,
 And no mouth but some serpent's found thee sweet.
 I would find grievous ways to have thee slain,
 Intense device and superflux of pain;
 Vex thee with amorous agonies and shake
 Life at thy lips and leave it there to ache;
 Strain out thy soul with pangs too soft to kill,
 Intolerable interludes and infinite ill;
 Relapse and reluctance of the breath,
 Dumb tunes and shuddering semitones of death...

...

... O that I

Durst crush thee out of life with love, and die,
 Die of the pain and my delight, and be
 Mixed with thy blood and molten into thee!
 Would I not plague thee dying overmuch?
 Would I not hurt thee perfectly, not touch
 Thy pores of sense with torture, and make bright
 Thine eyes with bloodlike tears and grievous light?
 Strike pang from pang as note is struck from note,
 Catch the sob's middle music in thy throat,
 Take thy limbs living and new mould with these
 A lyre of many faultless agonies...

This is, of course, wonderful verse. If it is obsessive, there are also moments when it is dramatic: notice the sudden sadistic tenderness of "Would I not plague thee dying overmuch?" One can almost hear the wheedling, teasing tone with which that must be spoken. But in general it is evident that there *are* human feelings both in and behind the verse. Of course, the poem is a

dramatic monologue: Swinburne is speaking ostensibly through the persona of Sappho, and of her love for Anactoria; he is not giving us his own emotion direct, the poem is not in any sense "confessional." Yet even if there were no other examples of similar amatory situations and intentions in Swinburne, one would still hesitate to ascribe the sheer voluptuous intensity of this verse merely to an astonishing faculty for empathetic invention: we feel that such verse is obsessive to such a degree that the obsession must be a real one. And in fact there are any number of other passages of lines that reveal, though not always with such fervour, the same or similar preoccupations. This much is obvious again, but must be said: there is in Swinburne a recurrently obsessive interest in the idea of pain, of pain suffered and/or inflicted, and of dominance or submission by means of it. The idea is typically an ambivalent one, and can be most conveniently characterised by a term from sexual psychology: sadomasochistic. This, it seems, is clearly something of which the word "morbid" can be used, and this is a morbidity of human feelings precisely.

"Morbidity of language" is a more complex question, though, as I have indicated, it may be intimately connected with the morbidity of the emotion. What is remarkable about "Anactoria" as a whole, and of the lines quoted above specifically, is the way in which the verse delights and luxuriates not only in the feelings it expresses but in the protraction of those feelings in linguistic terms; this protraction, that of the erotic and the poetic imagination persisting in the discovery of new and increasingly subtle possibilities in a series of statements that progressively qualify each other, is one of the main reasons for the peculiar power and intensity of the lines. The eroticism is neither repressed nor sublimated nor, to use Eliot's pejorative term, "diffused": it is not diffused on the merely verbal level, since the poem is multiplying situations and intentions and not merely words; and neither is it diffused on the emotional level, the level of feeling, for the intensity of these lines, miraculously, is sustained. The verse itself is somehow charged with an eroticism that it does not so much describe as enact, and so absorb: the erotic tension seems to both realise itself and expend itself in these progressive verbal and emotional variations that reveal it yet do not exhaust it. The emotion of the poem does not mount towards action, crisis, climax in terms of its meaning and intention, the logical progression of increasing cause and inevitable effect. Instead, the poem draws back, re-states itself, continues to withhold itself from action, fruition, conclusion at the level of *meaning*, and by means of *language*. "I would my love could kill thee" announces Sappho. But actually that is not what she would at all, since that would be an absolute and *final* event: yet this desire is not a momentary or aberrant thought; later considerations do not override it, and it remains always present in some sense as a desire and, in fact, is the desire that the

poem exists to express. It is simply that the consummation of desire would here be the end of desire, its ultimate frustration and failure. The desire exists as its own object; there is no act or other object, except the poetry itself, through which it finds expression. The desire exists somehow in a sense that is both psychologically and expressively at the intolerable threshold of the act rather than in the act itself. That is why the language can only announce the desired act and then retreat from it, contradict itself, reformulate itself, as can be seen in the following grammatical sentence:

I would find grievous ways to have thee slain,
Intense device and superflux of pain;
Vex thee with amorous agonies and shake
Life at thy lips and leave it there to ache;
Strain out thy soul with pangs too soft to kill...

There is no logical progression towards completion in the language here: the initial intention to slay Anactoria amends itself, in both words and feelings, to the desire expressly not to slay her, but to maintain her instead at a point just before her expiration or, presumably, her unconsciousness, results: to maintain her, in fact, at a point of the maximum possible consciousness of pain, and of delight for the one inflicting it. The progression of the poem seeks to maintain itself, in the emotional context, at an equally intense level throughout and in a similar state of emotional stasis: but it is a stasis that seems to be an almost mystical threshold, literally the point between life and death, and so there is no stasis for the mystical moment cannot be sustained in continuity: it can only be repeatedly, agonizingly (for both) approached and relinquished; and, as we have seen, it cannot be surpassed, since that would be the end of process and desire. The linear progression of language serves to maintain, or more accurately, renew the emotion so that it hovers repeatedly, almost unbearably about this asymptotic threshold. To speak of feeling and language here is to speak of the same thing:

I would my love could kill thee; I am satiated
With seeing thee live, and fain would have thee dead.
I would earth had thy body as fruit to eat...

The long first line here (13 syllables to the predominating 10), with its heavy preponderance of monosyllables, itself creates a rhythm of weary satiation, a sense of something cloying, as it were, in its own final quadrasyllabic word. But this languorous rhythm persists ("I would find grievous ways to have thee slain") only so long as the emotion it is to sustain and inform; and soon the emotion changes and, no longer seeking only a wearied release in the death of the other, begins to work itself into activity, marked by the introduction of the trochaic for the iambic line:

Vex thee with amorous agonies, and shake

Life at thy lips and leave it there to ache...

but only to relapse briefly again, and voluptuously, into the less urgent iambs which seem to dwell lovingly on their own erotic pleasure in the infinite prolongation of pain:

Strain out thy soul with pangs too soft to kill...

Notice the stress on the key words commencing and terminating the lines: "Vex," "shake," "Life," "ache," "Strain," "kill:" there is enjambement but without weakening the strength and rhythm of the individual lines. The lines are predominantly monosyllabic (Chesterton long ago noted Swinburne's preference for "short English words"), and here the monosyllables are measures with the calculated, anticipatory pace appropriate to the emotion arousing or dwelling on itself. Only briefly does the emotional meaning of the line become flustered ("amorous agonies"), and here the dactyls hurry its movement forward briefly too. Increasingly in the following lines, however, the excitement mounts into a flurry of more complicated, more urgent rhythmic patterns:

Intolerable interludes and infinite ill;
Relapse and reluctance of the breath,
Dumb tunes and shuddering semitones of death...

But then, again, after the repetition of the poem's ultimate but asymptotic idea, that of death, the line sinks once more into a momentary appeasement, or, in terms of the victim, a momentary reprieve:

I am weary of all thy words and soft strange ways...

In lines like these, emotion and motion are one. Feeling, syntax and rhythm are fused.

Part of the emotional pressure of the verse also derives from the repeated use of assonance and alliteration. This is a poetic device that can appear facile or arbitrary in a modern poem. In Swinburne's poem, it creates a necessary and obsessive insistence. Incidentally, only a great poet could have risked (and got away with) a word like "reluctation" in verse of such passionate intensity without dissipating that intensity; here in Swinburne it seems unalterable.

Strike pang from pang as note is struck from note...

Swinburne's verse has often been compared with music. Somehow this line can be heard to ring with the steady deliberation it expresses: it is pitched finely as a tuning-fork. But its music is not merely music: it is struck from the eroticism of the situation, the "lyre of many faultless agonies."

Eliot, who denies emotional content to Swinburne, states that he is a poet who dwells "exclusively and consistently among words." I believe, on the

contrary, that in poems such as the one discussed above and a good many of the others, Swinburne is seeking to dwell in an emotion that most typically, though not necessarily always so directly or intensely as in "Anactoria," is predominantly an ambiguous and erotic emotion. The distinction most relevant to much of Swinburne's verse is not so much Eliot's one of "words" and "objects," but "words" and "emotions." Eliot says that "When you take to pieces any verse of Swinburne, you always find that the object was not there — only the word." And he quotes the following lines in support of this:

Snowdrops that plead for pardon
And pine for fright...

What we are left with here is in fact not only the word, but the emotion. Swinburne has projected the ambivalent human feeling onto the flower. Eliot is certainly correct, in this instance, in insisting that the "object," the snowdrop itself, has "disappeared;" but for Swinburne the loss is of no consequence, or was worth it for the ambiguity of the line "And pine for fright," which can mean either "and pine *because of* fright" or "pine *to be* frightened:" the theme, again, of submission, and of submission half-willed. (I'll show some other examples of precisely this kind of ambiguity in due course.) Here the object has disappeared not into the word but into the ambivalence of the human feeling. We find this tendency elsewhere, as in the following cases:

Such chafed earth as choked a sandy sea...

"Chafed" is an adjective typical of Swinburne; here, in "Laus Veneris," it tells us nothing at all about the "harsh earth," which has again disappeared (and, here, with no discernible gain) into an idea of pained flesh. But, later in the same poem, the verb recurs, and memorably:

The bay-leaf that wants chafing to be sweet
Before they wind it in a singer's hair...

And here the word and the feeling and the object are at one. Note also, again, the syntactical ambiguity, momentary but clearly present, in that first line. Is it the bay-leaf that "wants" chafing in order to become sweetened? Or is it the actual *process of being chafed* that it "wants" to find sweet? I think, both. Elsewhere in "Laus Veneris:"

Knights gather, riding sharp for cold; I know
The ways and woods are strangled with the snow...

These would be remarkable lines in isolation, and no matter who had written them; but here, in the context of this poem, by this poet, the word "strangled" takes on an extra resonance of meaning, of suggestiveness, yet without verbal diffusion and without losing sight of the snow-bound woods. In fact, probably only Swinburne *could* or *would* have used that particular

verb. And who but Swinburne could have written this:

Asleep or waking is it? For her neck,
Kissed over close, wears yet a purple speck
Wherein the pained blood falters and goes out,
Soft, and stung softly, — fairer for a fleck...?

"A bad poet," says Eliot, "dwells partly in a world of objects and partly in a world of words, and he can never get them to fit...": from which formulation we see that it is now the poet himself who has "disappeared." But, of course, and despite Eliot's own ideas on the "impersonality" of the poet, it is truer to say that poetry must dwell partly in a world of words, partly in a world of objects, and partly, even if indirectly, in a world of human attitudes and feelings. Only the very good poets get all three to fit... And even if one admits that Eliot may often be right in a general sense about the disappearing object in Swinburne, it is because Swinburne is not primarily concerned with the objective world but with the world of feeling.

Yet if "Anactoria," for example, is a remarkable poem it is not only because Swinburne is able to both generate and absolutely *contain* such emotional intensity as we have seen in the lines discussed above, lines which in any other poet would represent an unrepeatable crescendo, not only in that the emotional impulse in any other poet would have exhausted itself of language but in that there seems to be present in these lines a maximum of the emotional pressure good verse can sustain for any period without ceasing to be good verse, or breaking down grammatically, or becoming tediously repetitious and anticlimactic; the even more astonishing thing about "Anactoria," which is a poem of close to 300 lines, is that Swinburne (or Sappho) can inhabit more or less the same fervid emotional climate throughout, and at similar intensity. In fact, a poem pitched at this level of fervour can probably only go on as long as the fervour is there: it is difficult to imagine that any change of tone could be successful. The emotional energy tends to modulate, as I have suggested, from the extreme of straining passion to a kind of languor, but these modulations function in an alternating, localised manner rather than conform to any overall scheme of dramatic progression: they represent the erotic interest repeatedly and alternately rousing and wearying itself. Swinburne's ability to sustain a theme without essentially altering it is what Eliot may have meant when he said that "You could not condense 'The Triumph of Time.' You could only leave out. And this would destroy the poem; though no one stanza seems essential." In "Anactoria" there is indeed an apparent development in terms of intellectual content by the end of the poem, where Anactoria's death begins to be seen less as a possibility solely for Sappho's erotic delight than as an abstract inevitability in time, a mortality that Sappho, through the immortality of her

poetry itself, will escape. Yet even here the ideational content is seen in erotic terms and seems to be produced out of the erotic feeling rather than existing independently of it in other possible situations: Sappho's own immortality is less a consolatory reflection for herself than an idea with which hectically and sadistically to taunt her lover:

Yea, though thou diest, I say I shall not die;
 For these shall give me of their souls, shall give
 Life, and the days and loves where with I live,
 Shall quicken me with loving, fill with breath,
 Save me and serve me, strive for me with death...

Sappho sees herself less as the poet immortal through poetry than as the sadistic Goddess, the eternal succuba to which all lives are tribute.

Even when the poem goes beyond the immediate erotic context to invoke "Love," it is hardly Aphrodite, but instead the goddess of a special form of love:

Nay, sweet, for is she God alone? hath she
 Made earth and all the centuries of sea

...

Bound with her myrtles, beaten with her rods
 The young men and the maidens and the gods?

The motifs of flagellation and bondage, recurrent in Swinburne, surface again. Ideas tend to find expression less for their own sake than in the original terms of the particular erotic relationships the poem sets up. Thus, Sappho to Anactoria is what God is to the world:

Cruel? but love makes all that love him well
 As wise as heaven and crueller than hell.
 Me love hath made more bitter toward thee
 Than death toward man; but were I made as he
 Who hath made all things to break them one by one,
 If my feet trod upon the stars and sun
 And souls of men as his have always trod,
 God knows I might be crueller than God...

The idea of a universe suffering under a harsh and wilful God is another recurrent theme of Swinburne's, but typically, as we see here, the idea is as much erotic as religious. There is in these lines no sense of a genuinely tragic order of existence. "The mystery of the cruelty of things" is a literary idea to which Swinburne has given his own peculiar erotic twist rather than a genuine religious or metaphysical matter. Here, it seems that the ambivalence of the erotic situation requires Swinburne (or Sappho) to project on to God the idea of submission, as Anactoria herself represents the

idea of dominance for the speaker. It is only in a nominal sense that the poem moves anywhere beyond the situation delineated in those lines examined earlier. The variations are essentially variations of the same subject.

On a less intense but no less insistent level of emotion than *Anactoria*, let's consider an example, from "*Laus Veneris*," of what appears to be narrative verse by Swinburne:

I felt the sharp wind shaking grass and vine
 Touch my blood too and sting me with delight
 Through all this waste and weary body of mine
 That never feels clear air; right gladly then
 I rode alone, a great way off my men,
 And heard the chiming bridle smite and smite,
 And gave each rhyme thereof some rhyme again
 Till my song shifted to that iron one;
 Seeing there rode up between me and the sun
 Some certain of my toe's men, for his three
 White wolves across their painted coats did run.
 The first red-bearded, with square cheeks — alack,
 I made the knave's blood turn his beard to black;
 The slaying of him was a joy to see:
 Perchance too when at night he came not back,
 Some woman fell a-weeping, whom this thief
 Would beat when he was drunken...

There are various reasons why this piece of narrative could only have been written by Swinburne and not, say, Morris. The most obvious one is, of course, the recurrence of the familiar sadomasochistic imagery: even the bridle must "smite and smite" as he rides. But an even more basic reason is that the knight, having slain "the first" of his foe's men, imtorgets the others, whom any other narrative poet would have had to dispose of too (they are never mentioned again), and turns to the idea of the dead man's bereaved lover, whom he "would beat when he was drunken," and thence to a general lament: "This bitter love is sorrow in all lands, Draining of eyelids, wringing of drenched hands..." etc. In fact, we see that the narrative episode is only a kind of cameo: appropriate, no doubt, to the form and matter of the poem, but with no essential relevance to the story as a whole. The narrative of these events is not thrown up in order to *get* somewhere, as the way of narrative verse customarily is, but rather to *stay* somewhere: it exists as a frame, something employed in the exigency of prolonging the poem in order that certain ideas necessary to Swinburne may, like a *leitmotif*, make their inevitable reappearance. The Wagnerian story of Tannhauser which underlines the poem is, if not quite its pretext, then little more than its

occasion...Yet Swinburne is *in* his story: the detail of the bridle suggests a quality of *presentness*, of total empathy with what he is relating; he is living his narration to the degree that his imagination invents even a bridle slapping on the horse's neck. But he is living the poem, and inventing, and relating in the terms of his own peculiar preoccupation, and the detail has its significance in that. Thus, when he speaks of the "sharp wind," the adjective again tells us less of the wind than of the feeling:

Touch my blood too and sting me with delight. . .

And again it's worth noticing that the adverbial phrase "with delight" refers ambiguously both to the subject and the object of the verb "to sting", and the ambiguity naturally obtains in the emotional as well as the grammatical sense. I think it can be suggested, in fact, that this emotional ambiguity tends to shape the actual line of development of the narrative as well as determine its images, syntax and diction, and to the exclusion, as we have seen, of normal narrative considerations. Thus, just as the line above contains an ambivalence both in diction and underlying emotional preoccupation, we see that the knight's victim, the slain man, is somehow required to embody a similar dual or fluctuating function, that is, to be both object *and* subject, submissive *and* dominant partner in the events described. Why Swinburne and his narration forget the other knights is because although the first knight (as submissive partner) has been slain, the erotic situation that the encounter symbolically enacts requires the introduction of the woman, as surrogate for the victor himself, whom the dead knight (now as dominant partner) "would beat when he was drunken". The verse of this passage is obviously less voluptuously intense than that of "Anactoria", but it is the same emotional preoccupations that govern the linear extension of the poem. Thus, the knight and the beaten woman, having served their function for Swinburne, and having no other function than a "representative" rather than an integral one, pass out of the poem, like the dead man's forgotten cohorts.... Then, a few stanzas later, we encounter another representative:

.... who, hidden in deep sedge and reeds
Smells the rare scent made where a panther feeds,
And tracking ever slotwise the warm smell
Is snapped upon by the sweet mouth and bleeds,
His head far down the hot sweet throat of her -
So one tracks love...

The panther, like the knight, seems to exist in the poem for no obvious reason other than that it procures the opportunity for lines such as "Is snapped upon by the *sweet* mouth and bleeds" etc. The panther is remote

from anything in Swinburne's actual experience and, again, is a purely literary idea, introduced to further the proliferation, tautologically and by means of symbols, of the original erotic preoccupation. There seems no necessity for it to be this particular symbol here instead of various others. But, again, it repeats an obsessive idea that may be found, among other places, in "Anactoria":

That I could drink thy veins as wine, and eat
Thy breasts like honey! that from face to feet
Thy body were abolished and consumed,
And in my flesh thy very flesh entombed...

Oral imagery abounds in Swinburne: mouths, lips, teeth, biting, etc., etc. Again, this may tell us something of the man. Applying amateur quasipsychoanalytical procedures to poetry is a dangerous and often derisory business, but certain aspects of Swinburne's verse seem to demand it. If Swinburne is obsessively interested in oral functions then we may as well know why, if it is possible to establish why. Certainly there is a biographical relevance here: Ada Mencken, with whom Swinburne consorted for a time but whose erotic predilections seem not to have been the same, said of him, a little querulously: "He doesn't understand that just biting's no good." In "Anactoria", the oral obsession seems to represent a desire to *know* the other person in some absolute sense; erotic knowledge, erotic acts themselves, are in Swinburne's poetry precisely *carnal* rather than, strictly speaking, sexual. It is a matter of *flesh* rather than of genitalia. The nature of love, of the erotic feeling, in Swinburne is an unusual one, but he is nevertheless a love poet in some sense, though there is perhaps no single necessary love object in his poems: they are concerned more with the innate paradox of otherness. Sappho desires to "abolish" the simple physical separateness of her lover by "consuming" her orally, engulfing her, suffering her in a form of oral assimilation that is an absolute incorporation. The desire is to abolish the intolerable, fluctuating mutual relationship of subject and object, or, to use Hegelian terms, of Lordship and Bondage; so that elsewhere, in "Laus Veneris" again, for example, we encounter the antithetical impulse, not to suffer oral penetration to the point of absorption, but to *penetrate*, to get inside the other, almost like a surgeon:

Cry, for her lips divide him vein from vein...

"Laus Veneris" is in fact particularly to be remarked for the insistence of its oral imagery, and the fluctuating ideas of being consumed or consuming through the mouth. The absolute consummation of the love is itself oral, abolishing otherness:

Yea, she laid hold upon me, and her mouth
Clove unto me as soul to body doth...

And so it is only in one sense that the episode of the panther, like that of the slain knight, appears arbitrary: at one level its presence in the poem is occasioned by no more than the ongoing inventive pressure of an impulse that the poem creates and appeases. Yet in a deeper sense it repeats a significant motif in the poem as a whole. And by and large this repetition seems somehow to work in Swinburne in a way that probably it would not in any other poet. There is an astonishing inventiveness not only in verbal terms but in terms of situation that enables the poet to express so repetitively, so tautologically, a preoccupation that we should otherwise enjoy very little of. And the verse is frequently less simple than it appears, less straightforward than it has usually been assumed: the panther may seem a curious interpolation in one sense and certainly, like the snowdrop, the panther itself does not appear. But again, for Swinburne it was worth it, for his essential poetic purpose once more is to realise not a single, fixed, individual object but an ambivalent intention. In the lines on the panther quoted above, the syntax, if examined carefully, does not allow us to be very sure which is predator and which is prey. The usual assumptions are reversed, or reversible: it seems not to be the panther who smells the track of the man, but the man who smells the track of the panther. And we should expect the line "and tracking ever slotwise the warm smell" to refer, naturally, to the panther again: yet it might refer also to the man, so that he himself seems to be hunting, paradoxically, the very mouth that will devour him. Swinburne's diction is not confused or slipshod here, but can simply mean the opposite of what we might immediately assume, and it remains haunted by ambiguity.

The following lines are from "Dolores:"

By the hunger of change and emotion,
 By the thirst of unbearable things,
 By despair, the twin-born of devotion,
 By the pleasure that winces and stings,
 The delight that consumes the desire,
 The desire that outruns the delight,
 By the cruelty deaf as a fire
 And blind as the night,
 By the ravenous teeth that have smitten
 Through the kisses that blossom and bud,
 By the lips intertwined and bitten
 Till the foam has a savour of blood,
 By the pulse as it rises and falters,
 By the hands as they slacken and strain,
 I adjure thee, respond from thine altars,

Our Lady of Pain...

This is not good verse, but it is still typical of Swinburne, and may serve to illustrate some of his weaknesses. All the familiar images are present, but their proliferation seems to exist on a merely repetitious verbal level. One feels that Swinburne has run out of invention at this point in the poem, and so he invokes a string of the usual motifs in the form of an invocation to Our Lady of Pain, who is also effectually his "Muse;" but the list exists only to get the poem under way again. "Despair, the twin-born of devotion" and "cruelty deaf as a fire" are almost certainly meaningless; teeth cannot "smite" unless they are required to rhyme with "bite," etc. But more interesting perhaps is the tautological construction

The delight that consumes the desire,
The desire that outruns the delight...

This again may seem almost meaningless, a verbal conceit so typical of Swinburne as to have an almost automatic quality: he could trot out merely incantatory paradoxes like this ad infinitum, one feels. And for this reason one is not likely to consider the lines very closely in terms of meaning: they seem glib and one reads them glibly. Yet in one sense they reveal certain characteristics of Swinburne's verse in general: taken in isolation and read simply with a view to elucidating their meaning, the human situation to which they refer, these lines present again a disturbingly ambivalent quality that becomes more rather than less paradoxical as one continues to stare at them. Certainly, I am not sure that they represent nothing more significant than merely a tautological inversion at a facile verbal level. Each line refers to the other in a way that is simultaneously complementary and contradictory. But like two facing mirrors, one perceives in them only an infinite regress. Taken on its own, each line is understood simply enough; but when they are taken together, one has no sooner fixed the meaning of the one than its inversion supplants it. The paradox is dynamic in this sense, in that each of the lines taken singly continues to refer one's attention to its fellow in the attempt to comprehend simultaneously the meaning of both... but somehow the lines persist in evading this attempt at reconciliation. They continue rather to represent twin polarities than create a field of force through their opposition. In this sense, that of interaction, they are dynamic. But in a wider sense they are static; like the two facing mirrors, they represent a closed system: the infinite regress refers to nothing but itself. It is suggestive not in any outgoing way, like Keats' "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," for example, but in an inward-looking way: at a certain point, out of one's sight, it disappears down the plughole of itself. Wrestle with the meaning of these lines for only a short time and you will feel this happen.

Tautology is of course, and by its very nature, self-referential. "Beauty is

truth, truth beauty" may connote a wider context for itself, but in linguistic terms it creates a closed system again. I have used the word "tautological" of Swinburne previously, and I feel that it is a word, particularly if one avails oneself of its various meanings, that suggests a good deal about the nature of Swinburne's verse. The tautology of his discussed above is of course a case of using the same words to say paradoxically different things. In the preceding part of this essay, I have also argued that Swinburne more generally evinces the tendency to use different words and situations to say what remains essentially the same thing. But I think that a third statement may be made: that Swinburne is often not only saying the same thing, but may be using precisely the same word or words to say it. When Eliot, in his essay, speaks of "so little material releasing such an amazing number of words," it is important to stress that these words are not necessarily always different words and groups of words. Donald Davie has said that Shakespeare and Hopkins are examples of poets whom one can conceive of using, given world enough and time, every word in the English language. Joyce would be another case that springs to mind. But clearly this is something that could never be said of Swinburne, who not only has a particular *type* of poetic vocabulary but a preoccupation with a small number of particular words which recur constantly in his work. Robert Nye states the matter thus:

The sea, regret, kissing, delirium, fire, weariness, roses, pain, cliffs, loss, stars, downs, the sun, wine, thunder, blood, pleasure, death...

Swinburne's range of reference as revealed through imagery and subject-matter is not wide, and scarcely need detain us from the more interesting and complicated business of his language...

Yet in fact there is, as we have seen elsewhere, a sense in which the constant recurrence of certain words in Swinburne often does not involve "a range of reference" at all, at least so far as reference to the outward world, or what Eliot called the world of objects, is concerned. The word "blood," for example, occurs 15 times, I think, in "Laus Veneris" alone; yet the word somehow does not appear to be excessively or intrusively in use, given the matter of the poem and that the poet is Swinburne. The reason, I think, is that the object, again, has disappeared; and it has disappeared, again, not into the word, but into the emotion that the word comes to denote. If Swinburne were a poet who dwelt "only in words," as Eliot maintains, he would have dealt, given his obsessively protractive and reiterative method, in synonym and circumlocution. But in fact the repetition of the same word, and not the substitution of another word, is central to Swinburne's poetic method. In Swinburne, the word begins to take on the status of a *tone* rather than a word; or, to use another analogy from nonverbal art, a quality of *colour*, like a repeating pattern in the material of the poem itself. The

repetition of a particular word gives a cumulative effect in terms of suggestivity by means of a diminishing effect in terms of the object it denotes. Both object and word blur towards a feeling that is peculiarly Swinburnian: the nouns "blood" or "pain" or the verbs "to bind" or "to tread," for example, carry an extra freight of subjective feeling in Swinburne, something that they do not have in any other poet. And this is not only because we can associate these words with known facts about the poet's sexual proclivities: he is using the words in a totally unique way. Nye's list above fails to recognise this, since it insists on treating Swinburne's recurrent concerns as *concepts*, which again is to fall into the error of separating them from the material of the verse itself, which has consistently been the recourse of Swinburne's anxious apologists as well as of his most bitter detractors: of those, in short, who have been embarrassed by him, though this embarrassment has prompted them in different ways. Swinburne, in fact, of all the great English poets, has alone suffered the misfortune of having to be extenuated by most of his admirers as being form without content, while being vilified by most of his antagonists as being content without form. In fact, the recurrent interest in the *idea* of pain or death in Swinburne is one subject, and the recurrence of the particular words "pain" or "death," say, in the actual fabric of the verse is quite another. Any adequate criticism of Swinburne must take account of both these things. Concerning the latter, the analogy, as I've earlier suggested, can best be made with nonverbal art: with music, or the art of pattern, say, in carpentry. Basil Bunting, in an interview recorded at the University of Warwick in 1976, described certain characteristics of Northumbrian art in general as "extreme intricacy of pattern," yet "without underlining," and likened Swinburne's verse to the illuminated pages of the Codex Lindisfarnensis and to certain carved Northumbrian crosses where the subject of the design is always the cross itself yet "every cross is a different design — an enormous fertility of invention." Bunting's analogy seems precisely right. In particular, certain words in Swinburne, like a leitmotif or colours in a pattern, gain a specific effect from repetition in the various contexts in which his own "enormous fertility of invention" has placed them. And why those lines from "Dolores" are not good verse is that Swinburne has been unable to resist "underlining." His invention has deserted him and the repetition that can be seen as characteristic of his best poems has degenerated into repetitiousness, marking time at a particular juncture of the poem. The invocation to Dolores, like most invocations in poetry, seeks to generate some kind of momentum for the voice; but Swinburne's fails, and flounders.

As for the "escaping object," perhaps this is a fortunate, even a necessary adjunct to the particular emotional preoccupations of much of Swinburne's poetry.

By the lips intertwined and bitten
Till the foam has a savour of blood,

for example, makes us uncomfortable not because the object has again escaped, but because it is a little too insistently there. We had been lulled by the repeated use of the word "blood" at various points in Swinburne's verse until it had ceased to be the thing at all, merely a "colour" in the mood, the pattern the poetry was creating. But then, suddenly, the word "blood" occurs in a line which causes us almost to taste it, and we are repelled. "By the lips intertwined and bitten" is, in its way, a wonderful line, for in order to pronounce it the lips and teeth somehow imitate the action described: but for that reason we find it disturbing, and the emotion has suddenly ceased to lie transparent and innocuous, taken up and expressed and realized in the inventive progression of the verse. The blood has almost become real. And clearly the fact that the word "blood" etc. exists predominantly in the tonal rather than the actual or objective sense in Swinburne is one of the reasons why we can normally accept the emotional meaning of what we read (which, of course, is not the same as denying that the emotional meaning is present). We see that the repetition of words such as this, which Nye feels "need scarcely detain us from the more interesting and complicated business of his language" is in fact one of the primary reasons why Swinburne's language is interesting and complicated in the way that it is. Swinburne's art is one of the variation and extension of a theme, and there are certain key words — "weary," "languorous," "blood," "pain" etc — which function as restatements and resuggestions of that theme, and of recurring aspects of it. Yet his style is not "approximative:" he is not in any real sense re-exploring previous statements, for each formulation is adequate to itself. It is, in fact, as I have tried to show, tautological in various ways, and in certain ways self-referential, self-enclosed.

More generally, Swinburne's poetic vocabulary, like his poetic concerns, is not open like that of Shakespeare or Joyce, but closed like that of Racine. As Eliot points out, Swinburne is not one of those writers who struggle to express "new objects, new groups of objects." In Swinburne, the object is always the natural object or the literary object or the archaic object and so on. It is impossible to conceive of Swinburne using nouns like "coffee-spoon" or "railway" in his verse. His concern was not for modernity, and his vocabulary always implies the past: he will prefer "raiment" to "clothing," and "sandal" to "shoe;" when he uses a word such as "plenilune" or "terrene" it is not in a quasi-scientific way like Joyce, but because it comes to him redolent with his beloved atmosphere of the Classical languages and the Mediterranean past. This is one of the reasons for Eliot's deprecation of Swinburne: he is a poet whom Eliot feels he and his contemporaries cannot use. And therefore, although Swinburne was "modern" enough to have been

one of the first Englishmen to admire those two most modern of his contemporaries in both Europe and America, namely Baudelaire and Whitman, it might seem to be they and not Swinburne who have exerted an influence on subsequent poetry in English. But I think that this last assumption may be oversimple, and that Eliot's dismissal of Swinburne as being of interest, but insusceptible of use may have been premature. For apart from what is of value in Swinburne for its own sake (and that is a great deal), what has almost certainly been of use to later poets, and even poets contemporary with Eliot himself, is neither Swinburne's themes nor his language (though this was of course to influence the early Yeats), but, more significantly and more lastingly, his mode of development in both. I am thinking, of course, primarily of Pound and, by extension, of a whole menagerie of poets who have been influenced by him in turn. Eliot denied a quality of music to Swinburne, but Eliot seems to have been thinking of music as song. I believe that Swinburne's verse is musical in a more "technical" sense, and in terms of larger forms of music: with respect to development of the theme, variation and restatement of the theme, and so on... These problems were to concern Pound in the writing of the *Cantos*, just as his attempts to resolve them were to concern several generations of American poets who came after him in turn, from William Carlos Williams to Robert Duncan and Gary Snyder. This entire line of development and whether ultimately it proves to be of lesser or greater importance, remains still to be clearly traced.

In a more important sense, Pound and his followers represented, however, the total antithesis to Swinburne, since they were looking for a style that would incorporate as much of the world as possible; Swinburne's style was founded on the exclusion of the world. Ultimately, in fact, we shall have to agree that Swinburne is unique and, for the most part, inimitable. But even if no one else is likely to write like Swinburne, a good deal of critical work needs to be done in order to establish quite why or how Swinburne himself wrote the way he did. He is, for example, certainly not the most inventive of English poets in terms of rhyme; his rhymes, it may well be, are usually simple, and predominantly monosyllabic. "Breath" chimes regularly with "death" and "flowers" with "hours" and so on, but somehow the repetition of rhyme itself often seems appropriate within the context of the poem. There is a remarkable passage in "Anactoria" (lines 35 to 58) where the second 12 lines of couplets exactly reproduces the rhymes of the previous 12 lines, forming in effect what is again a mirror image, but which is also an opposite state: "Thine amorous girdle, full of thee and fair, And leavings of the lilies in thy hair," which ends the first passage, becoming at the end of the second: "Thy girdle empty of thee and now not fair, And ruinous lilies in thy languid hair," and so on... Technically speaking, it is entirely simple but wonderfully

effective, and it is significant that the form, which creates both identity and opposition in the structural sense, once again encapsulates the paradox of the relationship it deals with... In more general terms, it may be that the simplicity of Swinburne's rhyme words, and their intermittent repetition throughout his work, adds to the mellifluousness that is so remarkable in his verse, conferring on it, at least in the case of those lines from "Anactoria" just mentioned, something of the limpidity of a wonderful passage in *Paradise Lost*, Book 4 lines 641-656, where Adam and Eve are walking in the garden at night, and tautology achieves the dignity of absolute transparency. That passage is surely one of the few other examples in English verse of Swinburne's peculiar gift.

Since I have insisted throughout that there is a markedly erotic content, certain recurrent erotic concerns in much of Swinburne's verse, and that this often appears "morbid", the idea of the verse involving some kind of "pornographic" or aphrodisiac function suggests itself. Clearly certain poems might be expected to induce some kind of erotic effect in their readers. Ruskin, for example, stated that "Faustine" made him "all hot, like pies with Devil's fingers in them", which itself is a strange and suggestive image. But while one grants the eroticism that is explicit in some of Swinburne, it is necessary to distinguish this in some sense from mere pornography. It may be possible to rescue Swinburne both from his Victorian reviewers and from Eliot. "Pornography" is of course a word notoriously difficult of definition, whether in a literary or a legalistic sense. But it may be that in *merely* pornographic prose, for example, we are aware of an erotic tension, and an erotic intention, that the verbal expression does not entirely take up: in one sense, for example, it may be too explicit, and in another sense perhaps it does not let us know enough, it is too simple. We feel that its explicitness is not the result of an impulse to speak honestly and directly of such matters as it deals with, but derives from some pressure of anxiety; it represents, it may be, a too immediate and too obvious gratification of the erotic tension that produces it or that which is produced. On the other hand, it may deal in an inexplicitness that is too coy, or arch, or cunning, in which case the effect will be the same: it will depress the reader in its status as literature instead of arousing him *through* its status as eroticism. Of course, certain types of bad literature of a non-pornographic kind have the same depressant effect: the reader can perceive not only the inostensible motive but also the writer's incapability or unawareness of the necessity for transcending it. Steven Marcus, in his book *The Other Victorians*, has shown how the sexual act in Victorian pornographic literature finds itself capable only of infinite repetition, the imagination of the pornographer lacking any possibility of fulfillment and of the appeasement of erotic tension that fulfillment brings. It is a willed but Sisyphean labour

towards some impossible summit of gratification and repose. This idea of repetition may remind one of those obsessively recurring motifs I have noted in Swinburne, but in his best verse (and in contradistinction, presumably, to pornography) the repetition is aesthetically acceptable, is one of the peculiar qualities of the verse. Of course, if he becomes *too* insistent, as sometimes he does, then we do withhold appreciation. But the very "morbidity of language" in Swinburne is surely, in some way or other, born out of the morbidity of the emotion that informs it. Direct expressive language would have been impossible for Swinburne, given the nature of his preoccupations. His reaction to the works of de Sade is perhaps instructive here: Swinburne, naturally enough, was fascinated by de Sade, but actually *reading* de Sade, according to Philip Henderson's biography of Swinburne, was invariably an occasion for howls of irrepressible and derisive laughter. One may presume from this that perhaps it is the most indelicate of literary subjects that require the most delicate thought. The style that Swinburne himself made perfect was musical, suggestive, tautological; a style that created a mood, an emotion, and permitted both repetition and invention according to the requirements of atmosphere; a style that, in Swinburne's hands at least, seems almost infinitely extensible in linear terms, and somehow *through* a limitation of subject matter and vocabulary rather than despite it; a style that was subtle enough to alternate and contrast the languor of erotic fantasy with the agitation of erotic passion; that was capable of reflecting the ambiguity of the emotions it was concerned with. Only a poet who was in the grip of *some* form of erotic excitement could have written such languid and luxurious verse, with its rhythms and atmosphere of weary satiety and voluptuous delight; yet perhaps only a poet who lived this excitement primarily on the terms of the poem itself could have modulated so exquisitely and so repeatedly the terms of his excitement: only Swinburne could have protracted the climaxes so subtly and for so long. And of course, the climax in the erotic sense never comes: it is poetry that does not seek to get anywhere, as pornography does, but that seeks to remain in itself. The fantasies and passions are real, but they seem without issue save in the poems. There is something self-tantalising about it perhaps, but finally, to use Dedalus's definition, it seems to be art that is static rather than kinetic. And this is true also of the relationships that the verse describes: they are situations of frustration as much as of desire, and both the meaning of the verse and its extended form recognise this in such a way that both desire and frustration become transparent in it. The nature of the relationships themselves is non-productive, and any ordinary fulfillment is impossible. They are, as we have seen, relationships which in their constant ambivalence are themselves closed systems, like the poems. Even the "love object", so necessary to pornography, seems effectually to have disappeared: in "Anactoria", the

eponymous victim herself is never seen. Even to Sappho, Anactoria is only an idea, as God is in that poem: they represent merely the twin terms of her ambivalent emotion and are no more than projections of a solipsistic self and of the paradoxes of this ontological separateness. Dante's love for Beatrice was not ostensibly erotic, as Sappho's is for Anactoria, but both Dante's love and Sappho's can be said to exist for an imagined rather than a real object. Yet Swinburne's imaginary object, despite the eroticism, is not the love-object of pornography, the masturbatory image; it is closer to Dante's for at bottom there is something mystical in it. Yet it can never attain a point of rest or equilibrium: it tilts constantly into its own antithesis. Baudelaire said of the sexual act: "*Celui-là, ou celle-là, c'est l'opérateur, ou le bourreau; l'autre, c'est le sujet, la victime...*" Swinburne's erotic interests seem to have required him to be both, and in some of its aspects his poetry reflects this ambivalence. The Other, as human object, has disappeared like the snowdrop into the contradictory emotions, which are mirror-images of each other in the matrix of the poetic imagination. Desire, oneness, is always unachieved, and is on principle unachievable: a slack that only the verse itself can take up. Perhaps the best description of Swinburne's verse, finally, is from his own hand, in "The Triumph of Time":

... a note grown strong
 Relents and recoils, and climbs and closes,
 As a wave of the sea turned back by song.
 There are sounds where the soul's delight takes fire,
 Face to face with its own desire;
 A delight that rebels, a desire that reposes.

Without Knocking

(after Attila József, Hungarian, 1905-1937)

Could be, my girl, could be
that my heart will fly to you.
Then come and open the door
without knocking.
But watch out!
I will quickly stretch you out upon the straw-sack.
(Do you know already what sighs it utters,
the dust, in the rustling straw?)

Fresh water I will bring you in a pitcher
and give me your shoes before you go. I will polish them.
Be quite calm! Here nobody will disturb us,
you can mend our things to your heart's desire.

This quiet quietness, my girl, do you hear it?
Are you tired?
Here is my only chair, sit down.
And give me your kerchief and your coat,
you will be too hot in this warm room.
Are you hungry?
I will give you a clean piece of paper as a plate
and everything that I can find to eat,
but leave something for me, too.
I am eternally hungry.

Could be, my girl, could be
that my heart will fly to you.
Then come and open the door
without knocking.
But watch out!
If you come to me this time, you will have to come back again.
You won't want me, will you,
to feel hurt?

Aim

FLUORIDE

Notes On Contributors

John Stanley Absher is a graduate student in English. His work has appeared in *Sunstone*, a new magazine.

Duncan Bush is studying at Duke as an exchange student from the University of Warwick, England. Widely published in Britain, his poetry has won both the Welsh Young Poets Award and the Eric Gregory Award.

Brett Hamilton Clarke, an English major from Connecticut, is prose editor of the *Archive*.

Julie Deal is a junior from Houston, Texas.

Worth Gurkin, Jr. is an anthropology major. His writing has appeared in North Carolina State's magazine *Windhover*.

Sandra Hingston is a junior from Pennsylvania whose poetry appears frequently in the *Archive*.

Laura Kreps graduated from Duke in December 1975.

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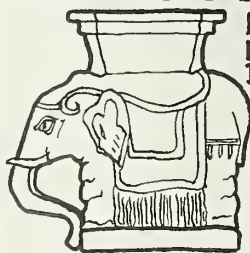
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90th

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RED CHAPPELL, WALLACE FOWLIE, and
WALLACE KAUFMAN

An interview with WILLIAM STYRON

THE ARCHIVE

Editor, **Michael K. Stanford**
Poetry Editor, **Marge Williams**
Prose Editor, **Brett Hamilton Clarke**
Layout Editor, **Helen Moffett**

The Archive Volume 89 Number 2

Spring 1977

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M.K.S.

Editor's note

*To have gathered from the air a live tradition
or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame
This is not vanity.*

Ezra Pound, *Canto 81*

The first issue of this magazine appeared in September 1887 as volume one number one of the *Trinity Archive*. It contained a review of Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* and an editorial on "The Chicago Anarchists."

From then until 1905 the magazine appeared monthly as the sole publication of Trinity College, a small Methodist school in Durham, North Carolina. It served as campus newspaper, literary magazine, and alumni newsletter. When a student paper was set up in 1905, the magazine became more exclusively literary in character. Twenty years later, when a tobacco magnate named James Buchanan Duke endowed the college with a huge sum on the condition that it exchange its name for his, the *Trinity Archive* became simply *The Archive*. Ninety years after its establishment it survives as the oldest college magazine in the South, and one of the three oldest in the country.

In the late twenties and early thirties, with the new Southern literature in the ascendant, this became one of the region's most significant small magazines, publishing work by Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Merrill Moore, and Howard Mumford Jones.

The Archive never again attracted so remarkable a body of outside contributors. But in the forties, fifties and sixties Duke produced its own crop of distinguished writers: the novelists William Styron, Reynolds Price, and Anne Tyler, and the poets Fred Chappell, James Applewhite, and Wallace Kaufman.

This anniversary issue consists of previously unpublished work by these established writers, as well as by undergraduates and faculty members now at Duke, and several young alumni just beginning serious writing careers. But all of what follows is at least partly the product of Duke's commitment — the oldest and most tenaciously sustained in the South — to the nurturing of good writing, and we thought that this live tradition needed gathering in some form, and here it is.

Two Years Underway: Pages from a Notebook

I graduated from Duke in June 1955 with plans to spend the summer at work on the life I intended — writing fiction. At my mother's home in Raleigh, waiting to sail toward three years of graduate study in England, I began that work in full-time earnest. Full-time for a writer, I soon discovered, can only mean three or four hours a day — which left me a number of hours to kill. I'd heard that writers kept notebooks or journals. I'd never been good at the journals I tried, lacking the requisite fascination with the minutiae of my own daily life; so I began instead (in my enormous spare time) a sporadic but orderly notebook — pages on which I forced my doggedly concrete mind to deal a little abstractly with the problems of my own stories and with the stories I was reading.

Since The Archive gave room between 1953 and 1955 to a number of my apprentice efforts — and to "Michael Egerton," my first real story — maybe the occasion of its anniversary is a time to unearth selections from those early notes in the hope that they'll at least suggest to current apprentices the value for their own lives and work of some parallel brand of doodling.

I hope too that readers will be patient with the mooning and melancholy endemic to notebooks, the occasional Cheshire-cat self-delight (forgivable in so solitary a trade?), and the judgments on old masters so typical of the full-of-beans but empty-of-mercy beginner. A number of the indictments handed down have been reversed by time (Katherine Anne Porter's work now seems to me as unassailable as any in the twentieth century); and some of the enthusiasms have been diluted, especially those for myself. Yet I still feel affection for this fervent young man, and some exasperation. He was working, though — off the streets and grooming one stretch of his world.

Except for a few silent corrections of spelling and punctuation, the selections are unedited. There are hundreds more pages, better and worse; but these are the ones which seem pertinent here, on this occasion.

Raleigh, 30 August 1955

I think I got a hold on "The Anniversary" yesterday. The first three pages came smoothly and evenly after all those false starts spread over the past two months, nearly. Of course, there will have to be all kinds of changes, and as the story grows, I'll be rewriting them (the early pages) backwards, pointing up certain repetitions and foreshadowings, filling out or cutting away, but the fine thing is to have begun at last, to have a window cut and framed for looking into the story. It still doesn't come in a tight and formal — "beautiful" — way so I'll give up that idea for awhile at least and let the story

have its head until it proves itself wrong.

Last night I finished reading *Mrs. Dalloway*, and am still a good deal bewildered by it. In some ways it is an incredibly beautiful book with a high finish, a certain brilliance about it which sets it off from anything else I have ever read. Yet I think there is something awfully hollow about it, somehow. It moves so rapidly — I can't recall reading a book so fast before. Everything runs into, becomes, something else so painlessly and artfully like in a dream (with the rather tremendous exception of the mad scenes of Septimus Warren, which I still think mar the surface badly without making any real contribution to the book. Too, their madness seems of an awfully superficial kind, a sort of movie or television madness without the real horror or the ringing sense of emptiness that would have made them worth reading, no matter what their place in the novel as a whole). But back to the fluidity: the immediate and obvious parallel to make is Proust, but that really isn't a good comparison at all. Proust always makes me stop, reins me in with nearly every sentence, asks me to look around myself *and* out of myself — into other worlds of vision and speculation. But with Virginia Woolf I have the decided feeling of suffocation, of hot house growth — all of this is being grown very much for its own sake, the beautiful and exotic plant to be looked at, wondered at, then forgotten. The reader is deftly, without his knowing it at all, imprisoned in the high sensibility of Mrs. Woolf's mind for a few hours, shown a few lovely objects, souvenirs of a full life, then let out again through that beautiful last page — really, in the end, unchanged and, most fatally, very nearly unmoved.

Stephen Spender observes the trouble in his *World Within World* (pp. 141-142):

Her strength [Mrs. Woolf's] and her limitations were that she didn't really know how it felt to be someone else. What she did know was how it felt to be alone, unique, isolated, and since to some extent this is part of universal experience, to express this was to express what many feel. But she was lacking in the sense of solid communal life, divided arbitrarily into separate bodies, which all nevertheless share. What bound people together escaped her. What separated them was an object of wonder, delight and despair.

And I think that is it. One of the finest passages in *Dalloway* illustrates it:

Big Ben struck the half-hour.

How extraordinary it was, strange, yes, touching, to see the old lady (they had been neighbours ever so many years) move away from the window, as if she were attached to that sound, that string. Gigantic as it was, it had something to do with her. Down, down, into the midst of ordinary things the finger fell making the moment solemn. She was forced, so Clarissa imagined, by that sound, to move, to go — but where? Clarissa tried to follow her as she turned and disappeared, and

could still just see her white cap moving at the back of the bedroom. She was still there moving about at the other end of the room. Why creeds and prayers and mackintoshes? when, thought Clarissa, that's the miracle, that's the mystery; that old lady, she meant, whom she could see going from chest of drawers to dressing-table. She could see her. And the supreme mystery which Kilman might say she had solved, or Peter might say he had solved, but Clarissa didn't believe either of them had the ghost of an idea of solving, was simply this: here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love?

I say all these things not really so much to hear the sound of my own voice as for what they may teach me.

Raleigh, 31 August 1955

Reading Shirley Ann Grau's *The Black Prince* has set me thinking about the business of transcribing Negro speech in a story. Miss Grau's use of the Alabama and Louisiana dialects, frankly, doesn't strike me as being especially effective. It just doesn't sound like to me that it's the way Negroes down there would talk. (Of course, I don't know.) And, too, she has a great abundance of sentences with "plain" in them: "I plain don't like him," etc. And, generally, she spells certain words phonetically, though you couldn't accuse her of excess in that department. I have written only one story with a Negro in it so far — "A Chain" — but I had to face the dialect problem then, and I suppose I was pretty much influenced by Eudora's* example (especially by "A Worn Path"). It's very seldom that Eudora uses the sound-spellings or even "colors" the speech very highly. She simply relies on certain minor turns of phrase to suggest what she wants and usually leaves out all those wonderfully bizarre things that stick out in stories and grab a reader away from what he's supposed to be thinking about. Mr. Faulkner does pretty much the same thing, at least in *Go Down, Moses*. I remember feeling about him, though, that he let the speech get far too "literary" in some of the stories and so turned some of his really wonderful Negroes into virtual Henry Grady's — but I imagine he was quite conscious of what he was up to, even if I do think it's awfully phony in the end. But back to "A Chain": I really do think I did a pretty good job on Snowball's speeches. There isn't one phonetic spelling, and I can't recall a single really out-of-the-way expression — certainly nobody would stick on things like "to take an operation" or "eating-cancer." So even if Snowball's speech isn't a perfect transcription, it comes close to being a good transformation of Warren County Negro speech into prose with a tone of truth about it and an unmistakable meaning.

It's quite possible to get too far away from the literal transcription method, though — and for other reasons and in other ways than Mr. Faulkner's. I

*Eudora Welty

think Katherine Anne Porter is the case in point here, and I have the distinct feeling that Miss Porter has attempted to universalize her stories, to insure their timelessness, to prevent their ever becoming dated. Her concern is, of course, a valid one, but her solution has robbed her stories of so much of the immediacy and music that they might have had for *now* and to hell with the future — though none of us should ever say that, least of all me. I have that same suspicion about almost everything Miss Porter has done — that she has refused to color her stories, to give them the time-depth and all the splendid feel of people living and talking, remembering and being superbly vulgar. On the other hand, maybe she just can't write that way, or doesn't want to at all, and maybe she'll outlast all of us who do — but I wouldn't bet fifty cents she does.

I didn't get anything done on "The Anniversary" today — didn't even try.

Raleigh, 9 September 1955

This is the first time I have even thought about "The Anniversary" in almost two weeks, which does go to show that I am the laziest sort of person you'd ever hope to find and that I can piddle whole days away without a qualm. But this time I can plead all the other business I've had getting things ready to be packed, and then too John Phillips was with me every night until he went home last Sunday. I have done some thinking this morning, though, and I wonder if this isn't the best way to do the beginning of the story: go ahead and do the first introductory pages in which it gets settled that Lillian Belle isn't going to the funeral with Brother, and that she sits down in the parlor to rest, and sees that picture of Pretty Billy. That will take about three pages, and I think it will be best to end the section with the poem — *not* making absolutely explicit (though hinting strongly) what the story is about and just who Pretty Billy is in relation to Lillian Belle. Then I can go straight into the scene of her walking to the cemetery (and I'd better give up the idea of her carrying any flowers), and the scene can end with her saying to the little colored boy, "You come on, Wash, and help me do what I got to do. Mr. Pretty Billy's birthday has come and gone, and I forgot it." *Still* I won't have made the point absolutely clear (can it really wait this long — maybe five pages?), and it won't be clear until they get to the cemetery and Lillian Belle starts her story. That, of course, is going to be the real problem — how to let her tell a six or seven page stretch of pure past narrative without it seeming artificial. I don't want it to be like "Heart of Darkness," with Marlow's tale — great as it surely is — set rather unbelievably in an "as-told-to" framework, or like Elizabeth Bowen's story "Songs My Father Sang Me" where the past action is narrated to a purely unnecessary listening post (a man). So what I have to do is this: work the colored boy into the stream of the narrative *somehow*, and let him really bring something to the story, some light — otherwise it might end up looking an awful lot like Chekhov's "Grief" or the Bowen story. Conrad manages to involve Marlow's audience rather powerfully in the story, and that is what I must do. Now the way to do it is

still a mystery. I have thought of letting the colored boy keep interrupting and coming in with his angle — the version of the Lillian Belle-Pretty Billy affair which is still passed about among the Negroes on the place. That way, if there is going to be any scandal about Pretty Billy's death, the reader's knowledge of that can come from the little boy, whom Lillian Belle can more or less ignore while she is pouring it all out.

I *do* think it can be a fine story, and I would certainly hope to finish it by Christmas.

Raleigh, 10 September 1955

It is tremendously bracing to have finished *Huck Finn* for the second time (the first time was in my junior year at Duke). After all the disappointments of the summer (*The Red Badge of Courage*, Katherine Anne Porter, Miss Grau, some of the Mann stories, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and all), it is so fine to come to a thing which is so splendid in almost every way imaginable. I haven't read *Moby Dick*, and it's been about five years since *The Scarlet Letter*, but I'm quite willing to bet there is nothing finer in our literature (America's) than *Huck*. Mr. Trilling pretty nearly covers my opinion of the book in his essay in *The Liberal Imagination*, though if I remember, he goes a little too far for me on the matter of the conscious ethical and moral themes of the book. I certainly would not deny that they are there. Indeed, it is their presence which makes the thing a great work of art in addition to being about the finest piece of entertainment you could ever hope for. Melville once talked about the blackness at the heart of Hawthorne, and everybody knows about that awfully dark Mysterious Traveller that Twain left, but I wonder if everybody perceives that great heart of darkness that is in *Huck*? For it is most surely there: in the Duke and the Dauphin (wonderful as they are) and in the capture and treatment of Jim, and in that curious chapter XXII (which appears almost stuck into the story at the last minute with no real connections) about "Why the Lynching Bee Failed." And then there is that crushing passage between Huck and Aunt Sally:

"... We blowed out a cylinder head."

"Good gracious! anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

Somehow that is funny at the same time it is one of the saddest sentences anywhere.

This is all very disjointed, but what I want to say is that the book is, I think, very nearly perfect (the last episode is too long, but where in the world could you cut it?) The sense of speech and of life being lived, and the way windows keep opening out of the book (Virginia Woolf observes in her *Diary* how Dickens creates such vivid, real people and situations that he binds you to the text, never lets you wander out in the adjoining landscape, and so Mrs. Woolf denies D. the highest sort of creativity, and I think she may be right, but nobody could charge that against Huck). About the only thing I know of

that even comes near it for vitality and love of people and sense of place and endless humor and invention is Eudora's *Ponder Heart*, which is very much and very proudly, I am sure, in the same tradition.

I could wander on pretty much all day pointing out all sorts of beautiful and touching things: the whole chapter, "Fooling Poor Old Jim:"

"...Dat truck dah is *trash*; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed."

and to take just one beautiful and absolutely right metaphor:

"...When he got a-front of us he lifts his hat ever so gracious and dainty, like it was the lid of a box that had butterflies asleep in it and he didn't want to disturb them. . ."

But that's all I will say about it now — only that it is the highest kind of book because it is all things: a great tale and a great indictment and a source-book of speech and custom, and because it bears in its heart the horror and the glory and the splendid vision.

Raleigh, 21 September 1955

The lesson of this summer has surely been that I cannot live a life of complete leisure — by that I mean doing nothing. Everything went fine until I finished up "A Chain" and got it off, and then I went into a sharp decline: first the tightness in the throat that nearly drove me crazy and is still with me and will probably be with me from here on out, then the pneumonia, and now all this spasming and rumbling and soreness in my intestines — which is most certainly nerves, though I worry about it a great deal. The whole trouble is that I didn't stay busy enough.

Oxford, 28 August 1956

Fifteen pages of "The Anniversary" are more or less done now. There'll be hours of revising and re-writing, but at least it's on paper after over a year of promising Diarmuid Russell and Eudora and Dr. Blackburn that I'd get on with it. I have faith in it: I think it can be a fine, even a beautiful, story, though I may never have the affection for it that I do for "A Chain." There are still several major problems which I haven't really faced up to yet. Just to list them here might make me think more about what to do with them: 1. As the story now stands, Pretty Billy is an exceedingly dim character. The reader knows next to nothing about him. Now, that may be all for the good and create the necessary ambiguity around the circumstances of his death. On the other hand, though, he's got to be a real enough man to carry his weight in the story. I think the real trouble is this: basically, he's going to turn out as a sort of Rhett Butler type if he's presented in great detail. I don't think there's a thing in the world wrong or false about Rhett Butlerism, except that Margaret Mitchell and Clark Gable made it pretty silly for anyone else to ever do that kind of thing again. Maybe I'm wrong. There certainly wasn't any of Rhett's genuine magnificence of style about Pretty Billy. He *was* a Seaboard

telegrapher, after all, not a Blockade Runner. But what he did have was charm, and I don't think I've got enough of that across in the telling. (Just look at the picture of him.) Another very important thing that mustn't be forgot is that he is seen always through Lillian Belle's eyes. So her character comes first. *Her Pretty Billy* isn't necessarily *the* Pretty Billy, and — somehow — the reader has got to know that. I suppose the obvious way out is to use Wash to the fullest as a chorus, but that's much easier said than done. 2. When I get to the ending I'm going to have to decide what to do with the real meaning of the story. Remember, I started out with a conscious theme: the forgetfulness of grief. Then on 24 October 55, I wrote this conclusion for the thing:

All those other things and their people were gone now — at least to her eyes and from here. Yet not gone at all but there, as always, in her vision if not her sight they stood, ranged about her memory — bare, as bones, of the dead, that was true — but bright and flashing still and in themselves when she would think of them as some proud mountain giving to the sun its flanks of snow or some white bird settling, with the softest cry, its slender wings into the dying light.

And I think I've fallen in love, just with the sound of that. As it is, I'm afraid people will think it's a little too straight out of Proust. And maybe it is. But, then, maybe I ought not to let that worry me — ever. Everything I've done is, more or less, superficially like some other story: "Michael Egerton" vaguely parallels Eudora's "Moon Lake" — which I didn't read until over three years after my story first began — and "A Chain" might suggest K. Mansfield's "Garden Party," though my story is a totally different sort of thing: the difference is in the texture and in the inclusiveness of "A Chain." But enough of that: I'll just think it all out *when* I get to it. I'm no good at all at this business of "thinking" out stories in advance. I've tried it. Oh, I kid myself into thinking I can meditate on a theme or a plot, but I never really get anywhere — except to sleep. I just have to sit down and labor out my 500 words a day, and then deal with those, more like a sculptor with clay than a true thinker. So today I must get down to Pretty Billy's actual death and his funeral.

The story *is* about Lillian Belle, after all, isn't it? And I must never forget that. Perhaps Pretty Billy must yield to her.

Oxford, 18 September 1956

I have just read again Joyce's "The Dead." It is so great a story that it almost shames me, and it is almost unique in doing that. Perhaps there are a few others — "Death in Venice," "The Wanderers," "Heart of Darkness" — but even they don't strike so dead to the heart as that one thing of Joyce. Perhaps it comes to me so powerfully now that I have just finished "The Anniversary," which is, in a way, a story *about* the same thing. Still, "The Dead" is a wider story, isn't it? To use Eudora's metaphor about Thomas

Mann: Joyce has flung a wide net and he has brought home many things. To name some of them: the forgetfulness of grief, the awful power of isolation which an unshared secret can give to him who holds it, and the ecstasy of youthful passion. Right at this moment, I'd say that "The Dead" makes Gabriel and Gretta into *important* people. They matter. I wish I were as sure about Miss Lillian Belle. She too had forgotten, she remembers but is not so moved by her memory. Of course, she is a very old woman, and Gretta is still young. It would only be in "The Warrior Princess, Ozimba" that I could try myself with the sudden force of remembered grief on one who is young. I read "The Anniversary" this morning, and for the first time I felt sure that I had done a fine thing. Now I wonder just how fine it is when you stand it beside something like "The Dead."

I remember once in a letter to Frank Lyell I said that I thought "The Dead" the finest story ever written, and he said that he wasn't willing to call it that. Perhaps, someday, I won't. Perhaps, after all, the ascending part of the story is far too long. Perhaps the story would fail dismally on that account, if the ending were not so crushing. But there you are, in front of genius. You say to yourself: I should feel joyful, thankful even, that someone has done so fine a thing. And I *do* say that each time I read it. But I also say: I burn to do as fine a thing. And then a greater one.

For the record, I might say that I completed "The Anniversary" in Oxwich last Saturday, which was the 15th of September. It began with the time (June 1955) John Phillips and I visited Miss Jennie Alston at Cherry Hill in Inez, and Mr. Ed Falc and Miss Carrie were there, so old. I saw Miss Carrie walking out in the yard one morning, and I put that together with the walk John and I took down to the Alston graves way behind the house, and the story began. I remember thinking a good deal about the opening sentences when I was riding to New York with Ted Ziegler and his mother in early June of 55, and I told Eudora a little about it one morning while we were having coffee in Schrafft's: I said that I was a little worried that people might compare Lillian Belle's little pilgrimage with Aunt Phoenix' in "A Worn Path" (the story was hardly past that walking stage then, and none of it was on paper, really). Eudora said, in her reassuring way, for me to go my own way and write the story as best I could and not care a hang for what anyone else said. So when I got back to Raleigh and got "A Chain" done and sent away, I began to think about it and got the first few pages down in a rough way. Then there was all that nervousness and the pneumonia and the tension about leaving home, and the story went begging. Then there was Oxford and, straight away, all that stomach trouble and agonizing fear, yet I did manage to write a few more pages — up to Mr. Idle Carraway's poem, I believe. In Florence, at Christmas, I managed a little bit more, but still hadn't got into Miss LB's actual narrative. That didn't come until the summer term was over and I was in Hampstead with Dr. Blackburn. Then I wrote about 700

words of the narrative and stopped until I got back to Oxford from the Scandinavian journey. That was August 21st. From then on it went at about 500 words a day, and I had the feeling of completion when I typed off the 23rd page of that fair copy in Wales. For certain, I'll be whittling away at it for a few more weeks yet — though I really ought to set a deadline for sending it off to Diarmuid Russell. I don't fool myself about it either: in a year's time and maybe longer, I'll still be finding words and maybe whole lines that don't really belong, but now it seems almost right. There are times — like this morning — when I believe in it and in its beauty strongly, and there are times — like a few minutes ago — when I doubt its accomplishment, if not its heart of truth. Still, it is a thing *done*, a deed almost, another piece in that homely monument I mean to build for my father. In a sense, these stories are what he died for. And that requires a lot of repaying.

19 September 1956

It is a fine story.

Oxford, 3 December 1956

On the 21st of November I began writing "The Warrior Princess Ozimba." (The idea first came to me last April or May while I was walking down Merton Street. The name, of course, I'd had for a long time. I remember "offering" it to Eudora, but she said it was too good for me to give away and that it would make a grand title for a book of stories.) So I've written on it with some steadiness and now I have the first 1750 words. I can't see how it could possibly get any longer than 10-11 pages.

And it has its peculiar problems, too: at first I worried a little about the first-person narrator, but after all that really is the only way to get that sort of laconic, ironic intensity that this story — more than any of the others so far — wants. Well, then, assuming the first-person to be the only way to tell this story, I've made *this* problem for myself: exactly what sort of man is the narrator? In the pages I've written so far he indulges in some rather modest "poetic" observation:

...the sun spread back over her face, and whatever it was my grandfather thought the Warrior Princess Ozimba looked like, it must have been something like that.

...But the one movement was all, and then she was back in her age, like sleep, so deep and so still that I wouldn't even have sworn she was breathing.

Now the sort of man who can observe like that isn't an altogether insensitive person, and the question is would this sort of man be capable of allowing his personal sense of his father's loss to go dull so soon? Well, doesn't the truest answer to that question provide an even more profound and complex theme for this story than for "The Anniversary": That even the most sensitive of us,

those who are susceptible to beauty and dignity and the pride of age, *do* forget and forget quickly and blessedly. But tragically.

So the point is to keep his "finer" observations few *and* of very high quality — not just boyish poetic effusions — and so make the reader's shock of discovery all the more intense and tragic. For this *will* be a tragic story — maybe the first I've written. For all the pathos of "A Chain," I don't think the question of tragedy really enters in — except insofar as death is always *the* tragedy; its mood is much more one of lonely and wondering affirmation. And "Michael Egerton" is surely pathetic, and "The Anniversary." But this new thing is going to be different. And I think it may be great.

There was a note from Lord David* this morning confirming that I was to dine with him in New College on Friday, but then I saw him in Merton this noon and he asked me to postpone it until next Tuesday. The main reason I've asked him to read the stories (and for the same reason that I want Elizabeth Bowen and Spender to read them) is so that he will say whether or not they are too firmly rooted in an exotic place and speech and people and whether I have taken too much for granted a knowledge of Southern manners and life and speech and, in particular, the sort of personal relationships that seem to happen in the South and nowhere else that *I* know of.

Oxford, 30 January 1957

I called on Lord David this afternoon at his home. He had told me yesterday that he would like to talk about my stories now. So when I arrived he began by asking me what *I* thought of the stories. I said that I liked all of them except "The Anniversary." (I haven't given him "The Warrior Princess" yet.) He said he felt much the same way: he was inclined to like "Michael Egerton" best because it was like an arrow going straight to the mark, but he was sure "Chain" was just as good. He didn't mean to say "The Anniversary" was a bad story, just that it seemed somehow less satisfactory than the other two. When I told him what I meant the story to be about: the forgetfulness of grief — he thought and then said perhaps that suggested why the story didn't quite come off because when he had read it, he remembered asking himself just what *was* it a story about. He found its situation and the characters very real, but there was this element of mystery in the end. Then we talked of "Michael Egerton," why I wrote it. He especially liked Michael's father, and, too, he said he very much liked the way I didn't seem to be a know-it-all about my characters, that some writers seem to suggest, "if I only had the time I could tell you much more about these characters," but that mine give the reader room for creation, though that's not to say they are unrealized at all. Then about "Chain": he wondered

*Lord David Cecil

if the old grandfather died (after the story), and he thought the entire death scene extremely effective. In fact, he said, it seemed one of my great virtues to make the unexpected seem perfectly natural. Then we talked about the story in general, speculating about the great stories: Joyce, Mann, Conrad, Chekhov. He thought I was much more in the Chekhovian "line" than in the Jamesian. (He lent me Desmond Macarthy's essay on James, and we talked a good deal about James' great limitations and how he ultimately became a kind of prisoner of this vast style. Lord D. said he was quite sure no one who didn't write could quite understand how much a writer is ruled by the form which he selects. And it seemed to him fatal and ludicrous to teach people the James method because that was so intensely personal a method and — even worse — a method which forced one to exclude so very much. Reading a James novel, he said, is rather like being taken down a long dark corridor into a room, heavily curtained and with every window bolted tightly, and then talked to interminably.)

We said a good deal more which I don't recall. But I left feeling very happy because he had seen in the stories the things that I hope people will see: the reasons for having done them.

Eight Women from Proust's Novel

1. *the duchess of Guermantes* (first seen in Combray)

"You'll see her at my daughter's nuptial mass,"
said Dr. Percepied to young Marcel,
who for a year had yearned to contemplate,
yes, even from afar, the duchess of
Guermantes. You'll see her in the chapel of
Gilbert called *le mauvais* where Brabant counts
her ancestors are buried."

Could it be she?
blond hair, large nose, mauve colored scarf, a face
almost too red. Her smile moved here and there,
but when it reached the boy, he knew it was
a sovereign's smile. . . of periwinkle blue.

2. *Françoise* (in Combray)

"Was she at mass in time for it to count?"

Françoise, as old and wise as France, knew how to field such questions that my aunt would ask, and spoke of menus with asparagus, of Saint Louis as if she knew him well.

Her bonnet frills were stiff and white, her face less easy to recall. She stood erect like saints and kings in stone at Saint-André.

Her code demanded that she venerate Leonie at her death: she wept and groaned as knights of Roland wept in that old *Song*.

3. *Odette de Cr  cy* (in her apartment)

Rue La P  rouse. "For you I'm always free."

The China bibelots, the cattleyas,
the strings of Turkish beads, the screen with fans
tacked on: this is her world, Swann thought, and when
the second time he came, her loosened hair
reminded him of Botticelli's skill –
the fresco, yes, the Sistine Chapel girl
of Jethro, in the cadence of her neck.

To have Odette beside him in his room,
he framed that Florence masterpiece, the wife
of Moses, placed her on his desk and lived
a dual love of art and art of love.

4. *Gilberte* (in the Champs-Élysées)

One day without companions in the park,
I heard a girl cry out: *Adieu, Gilberte!*
That name I'd heard in Combray's hawthorn lane,
and now in Paris where the meagre grass
was faded by the sun.

On later days
when she accepted me, we often played
the games that children play, and once I said,
"this agate marble has the color of
your eyes." "You keep it as a souvenir,"
she answered, as her father came toward us.

The Combray Swann was now the father of
Gilberte. I too had changed: I was in love.

5. *la Princesse de Luxembourg* (at Balbec)

My grandmother and I would watch her walk
the beach alone when others ate their lunch:
a tall form leaning on a parasol.
Her back was arched, her body seemed to float.

Madame Villeparisis presented us:
"Princesse de Luxembourg." Her smile
was kind but vague, as if we were two pets
whose heads her hand would stroke through bars, if we
were in a cage.

The wonder of the beach
was not this Royalty, but one who stood
close by and followed every step she took:
her page, a small black boy in satin red.

6. *my grandmother* (in Balbec)

My room at Balbec, far too small for me,
was full of things I did not recognize.
The clock ticked loud, the ceiling was too high,
a fever in my bones, I longed to die.

Then grandmamma came in. I threw myself
into her arms, and kissed her cheeks and brow.
She bent to help remove my boots, and when
I tried to raise her up, she begged, "please, let
me do it, this, your first day here, and if
tonight you need me, knock the wall three times,
my bed is on the other side, the wall
is thin, just give three knocks and I'll come in."

7. the princess of Guermantes

The night I took my seat for Berma's *Phèdre*,
the *Opéra* was more *salon*, as men
moved into boxes where the ladies sat
and out of them to sit in other realms
where goddesses like great white flowers reigned.

The princess of Guermantes presided there
as on a halcyon's nest. Her loge: a cube
of semi-dark, her body in a foam
of feather fans. Less visible than felt,
her presence drew the eyes more than the stage
of Berma playing *Phèdre* in greenish light:
a water scene of guilt. Which deity
to watch: the princess or the upstaged queen?

8. *Albertine asleep*

The sea at Balbec came to life for me
when Albertine was sleeping on my bed:
her body, like a stem from some great plant,
her breathing like a murmur of the sea.
No longer was she one of many selves.
Her sleep had made me free to look at her,
to see in her the life of trees, the life
of vegetation which I could possess.
My love seemed possible when suddenly
I saw and smelled and, weary, crouched beside
the bay of Balbec in my Paris home.

In Randolph's Woods

It rained last night. The wet black boles
of all these pines and oaks
are blurred behind a pressing fog,
as if it all were a finished watercolor
and someone spilled water over it,
washing the lines together, so that
no one sees where one tree ends
and another begins. The sun
does not rise this morning, but oozes,
as from an artist's tube of color,
welling over hedge tops and blurring
its own blond brightness in the drab
of mist. They bleed together in ocher.

This European sky in American woods
is a rare encroachment
on a fugitive folk. We, who left
the fief-heavy forests and
crucifix-haunted burghs, were the steam
released to relieve the pressure,
to prevent the ancient savage pot's explosion.
Now this new golden land of Durer's diversion
has been thrown on a different potter's wheel.
Young masters jostle about its glazed walls,
painting their masterpieces upon it,
decorations warming in the sun.

I feel a yearning to go back.
I watch the steam before me slowly pump
and pulsate with the heat of the aging land.
As the steam rebuilds, I fidget,
a swelling watercolor handle,
welded to the woods. I feel
the maternal pull of an orphan.
There will be no more new continents.
But I will go, and until I can pay the fare,
I wait for this morning fog to break.

Archaic Torso of Apollo, translated from Rilke

—For Herman Salinger

We weren't familiar with his stunning head
Wherein hung eyes like ripened fruit, although
His torso has retained a lamplike glow
In which his gaze, but lower set,

Still keeps and gleams. The bending of the bust
Could otherwise not blind, nor in the curve
The loins outline could any smile converge
Upon that center, once the seat of lust.

This stone would stint the sight and be unmade
Beneath the shoulders' crystal-clear cascade
And would not shine so like the glossy hair

Of beasts and burst out like a star and knife
Through all its bounds. For there is no place there
That does not see you. You must change your life

Intensive Care

Prologue

January 20, 1973

When he went in for the last time, his father was breathing quickly and shallowly. The nurse had called them from the hallway, urgently — Come now. (Fluid was collecting in the chest after the coronary and breathing was difficult, the heart weak.) The room was pale green. Under the night's growth of beard, his father's skin was grayish-blue, smoke-colored. Breath in. Out. Quickly. And then a jerk, his neck arched to the ceiling and there was no more breath. The nurse asked them to leave and as he took his mother, the doctor put a thick wooden board across his father's chest and hit it with his fist, hit it hard.

February 22, 1973

He lay still, naked under the quilt, and listened for her footsteps: soft through the bedroom on the rugs, clicking across linoleum and then quiet as she came into the front room, near him. "Michael." She whispered as she came toward the couch. "Michael, wake up."

He stirred a little but pretended to be asleep. She went to the lamp at the end of the couch, a heavy lamp of crystal and metal, and switched it on; there was a dull light with rainbows and sparks from the prisms. He twisted his head to see her — her face frowning intently, a childlike intensity — bending near the light apparently examining her fingernails, picking at an unsatisfactory one. She held them away and spread apart as if their brown polish were not quite dry. Her robe parted as she bent and he watched for the curve of her breasts (I saw a small curve, smooth).

She straightened and moved to him, pulling the collar and hem of the robe closed. "Michael. Wake up." She leaned down and as she began to touch him (her hand out to me and the robe parting at the throat) he reached quickly from under the quilt and caught her behind the legs, off balance. She made a sharp cry as she fell beside him. He kissed her noisily and held her at the waist.

She pulled her face away and stared accusingly. "You were supposed to be asleep."

"I was waiting for you. I heard you."

"Peter's going to be here soon. Get up. Get ready."

"We can wait for him here." He stroked the back of her thigh and tried to loosen her robe. "Get under the covers."

"Stop it." She held her collar and tried to stand up gracefully. "Peter's coming any minute and you won't be ready. Get dressed."

"I don't need a damn cuckoo clock. I'll be ready." She laughed and turned to go. "Get out of here."

She tossed back her head and laughed: when he'd first met her, she would toss her head back and her hair would fly and curl around her shoulders. (Now her hair was close-cropped and I could see the curve of her neck.)

She went back to her room, but she left the door open. From the couch he watched as she slipped out of the robe, her back to him. He stood up and began to dress.

But there were no socks. He had forgotten clean socks and was crawling under the couch, feeling for the ones he'd taken off, when Peter came. Michael waved him in but kept feeling for the socks, his eyes straining in the dim light. Peter came in and walked quietly, bent over Michael and then pinched him. Michael jerked up and hit his head on the edge of the couch and Peter ran, laughing, back into the kitchen.

"OK, clown. That hurt."

"But such a nice ass. Put your pants on or I'll do it again." He grinned, dark eyes wrinkling with his grin.

"Yes, do it again. Please."

Peter laughed and came to the kitchen door. He reached up to the doorframe and began to swing. "Where's Pat?"

"In her room getting dressed."

Still hanging by his fingertips, he turned — one hand at a time and never touching the floor — to face the bedroom and began to swing again. He was wiry and his shoulders flexed easily as he moved. His body swinging slowly, he looked like a gymnast and Michael watched him, watched him intently.

"Pat." He changed motions and began to chin. "Let's go. Dinner time, lady."

Michael continued dressing.

She came out, tying the belt to her dress. The dress was soft, the color of her nails, and clung to her as she walked. She held her keys out to Peter. "Let's take mine. It hasn't been driven for a while."

He dropped from the doorframe, dusted his hands and straightened his jacket. "My pleasure, madame." He took the keys and kissed her hand. "I shall guard them with my life." He kissed her hand again. "I shall — "

"Enough," she said. "Let's go." She put her arm around him.

He turned to Michael. "Ready, birthday boy?"

It was cold outside: as they walked to the car their breath hung before them like smoke. Sitting in the front seat — all three in the front with Pat in the middle — they shivered and rubbed their hands while the defroster strained

to clear the glass. The vinyl of the seat was stiff with the cold.

Peter turned from the wheel and grinned. "Well, sir. Birthday? What to do for a birthday?"

Michael shrugged, smiling, and looked at the windshield's frost in the blue street light, moving his head to see it sparkle. Pat — her face reddening in the cold — leaned forward to rub her hands in the defroster.

Peter went on. "Come on. You've got to have some ideas. I mean, it's an annual affair." Pat laughed, settling back between them, her hands warmed. "We'll do whatever you want to do. What do you usually do for your birthday?"

Michael stopped staring at the frost and looked down. He cleared his throat. "I usually go home and have birthday dinner with my parents. I always went home." He paused (a long pause, with the defroster blowing). Then he sat up. "But I've taken too much time off already. I called my mother and told her I couldn't come."

No one spoke. None of the three even moved and the silence was too long.

Finally Peter bent down to a small clear arc on the glass. "I think I can see well enough to drive. I'll try to at least." He put the car in gear and pulled into the street. They drove slowly, staring straight ahead.

The roads, back roads to the lodge, soon became narrow, with more and sharper curves as they left town. They could see trees, eventually only trees, on either side and half-melted snow on the banks with brown patches showing through. Occasional oncoming cars lighted the banks and the road and then the frosted windshield. The clearing arc on the glass grew larger.

Pat slouched low in the seat and stretched her legs out, diagonally. She yawned. "When will we get there? I'm starving."

The windshield was clear now and Peter drove easily, one hand on the wheel and one carelessly draped over her thigh. She paid no attention to it. "Not long now," he said. "You'll live another ten minutes." He scratched her leg teasingly.

They topped a steep hill and Michael watched the headlights reflecting off the road. Then they began down, quickly and gaining with the incline. He felt a roller coaster lift in his stomach and legs, a tickling, frightening lift at the speed. And then a sudden lightness (Peter's hands gripping the wheel tightly; white knuckles) as the car floated a little and he remembered the glare of the road in the lights: a clean glare of ice. The car slowed and he could feel its weight again; it moved forward with no wavering. He let out the breath he had held without noticing. "Good job."

Peter still gripped the wheel. He didn't respond. Finally, "Thanks."

Pat had straightened, clutching onto Michael's leg (her fingers). She sat back now and folded her hands in her lap. "Jesus. Be careful. That could've been —"

"I'm trying, lady. We're almost there. There should be a sign up here soon." The car went on, all three looking for the sign, talking sporadically.

As they went up hills, Michael watched the telephone cables overhead: dark against the night the wires were invisible until suddenly, shining with ice, they would appear in the upturned headlights, shooting out in long curves from the poles as if they were flying.

Several hours later, after the meal, after the wine — three bottles of wine — they said goodbye to the waitress and came out onto the deck of the lodge. "Jesus, it's cold." Pat stumbled on the step but caught herself and headed for the car. "Get the damn engine warmed up."

The sky was clouded over and there was little light for them to pick their way back down the stone path (stepping stones across the yard, across the stream) from the lodge. Some of the stones were icy and Peter slipped occasionally, cursing drunkenly and jumping before he fell. Michael, walking behind, smiled at him — big wiry man now awkward in the dark (helpless). Michael walked in the snow beside the path; at each step the surface glaze held him for an instant and then let his foot fall through and down a few inches. "Come on." Pat was at the car, impatiently pulling at the handle of the locked door. The wind blew her coat and lifted her skirt.

Once in the car Peter raced the engine to warm it. They huddled together, Michael with his arm around Pat. Her hair, close-cropped, was still neatly combed and in place. He kissed her. "Happy birthday to me."

He kissed her again.

Peter laughed. "OK, break it up, kiddies. Break it up." He patted her thigh and moved toward her. "My turn, lady."

She turned her face toward him, speaking over her shoulder. "It's not your birthday." She laughed. Soon they all laughed: pleasant, wine-filled laughter.

Peter turned the car around and drove out of the parking lot, onto the highway. Michael kissed her again then sat back, holding her hand and watching out his window for the low arcs of the telephone wires.

But then around a curve lined with trees, there was a clean slicing sound and he felt the car floating again, a loss of center (an easy gliding slip, a sudden slippage), with what seemed almost a motionless lightness. He felt a dull thump and they stopped.

They were on the other side of the road, headlights still pointing around the curve. He opened the door and looked out; the rear wheels were deep in a snow-filled ditch. "Try it, Pete."

Peter, still holding the steering wheel tightly, pressed the accelerator. The tires whined loudly as they spun.

"Oh hell." Michael shut the door again and turned in his seat. "Here we are. 'Drunken Party-goers Freeze in Ditch.' Let's see. It'll be, 'Cozy and warm from their birthday dinner, the three had no idea what icy doom lay at the end of their carefree drive.'"

"Oh cram it, Michael." Pat sat up, a little slur left in her speech. "We're only about half a mile from the lodge. We could hitch back."

Peter, his mouth tight (thin lips pressed together) let go of the wheel and slouched down into the seat. "There aren't any cars."

"Well, then one of us can walk back and call a wrecker."

"Great." Michael grinned but not laughingly. "Which one? Happy birthday to me."

Her eyes were still drooping, half-closed, and she smiled (taunting). "Happy birthday to you. Pete and I'll wait right here for you." She moved closer to Peter and he absently put his arm around her. He stared straight ahead, his eyes and face glowing from the lights of the dashboard. "Hurry back now. We'll be waiting." She blew him a kiss.

Michael grumbled but opened his door again and got out. The snow (it melted during the day and froze again) crunched under his feet as he climbed to the edge of the road. He tried to walk on the pavement, but it was iced over, so he walked in the frozen snow, feeling it hold him and then quickly give way. The wind made rushing sounds in the trees on either side, but only touched him lightly.

When he turned he could see the distant flashing of the car's emergency lights until finally he made his way around the first curve and the trees blocked them from him. He walked along the road slowly and slapped his arms to keep warm, thinking of birthday parties at home and his friends in the car, wishing he were either place.

At the lodge — warm room with dark wood — the receptionist showed him a phone and brought him coffee. A big woman with fuzzy white hair; her eyes were puffy as if she'd been asleep. He called a garage, thanked her for the coffee and left. She smiled at him, knew he was drunk.

He walked back more quickly, cold now and wondering about Peter and Pat. A car climbing the hill to the lodge, its wheels spinning occasionally, passed him as he walked. The driver waved and went on.

The dark trees looked alike as he walked and he wondered how far he had come; he felt in the middle, always halfway to the car and halfway to the lodge and with no way to measure his movement. He watched his footprints of the way up, counting them.

Finally, around a curve, the car silently flashed at him (the red flash).

Then from the other direction came headlights and the rotating yellow flash of the wrecker. As it came nearer, its light — emergency light — circled on the trees, a wide circle making the trees seem like rough walls of a huge room, walls like a cave: a silent, dazzling circle. Michael came near the car as Peter got out. The garage man was under the front of the car hooking a chain to it.

Peter waved. "Nice work. We waited like we promised."

"Great. Your turn now. I'm freezing." He climbed into the car.

Pat (her hair was not right) took his hands and began to rub them between hers. "Welcome back."

"Thanks." He wrestled with his coat. The car was too warm; it smelled of

the hot metal of the defroster.

The truck driver, a short man in a fleece-lined jacket, got back into the wrecker and started the engine. Peter stood back, his coat open and flapping in the wind. The chain rattled as it was tightened and then a quick jerk forward. But they could feel the car slip back. Another jerk and scraping sounds as the bottom of the car moved against the bank. A third, more violent jerk and the motion stopped. Peter went toward the wrecker, nodding his head. He paid him, listening to the driver, and then looked surprised. He shook his head no and the truck drove back the way it had come, its emergency light out.

Peter (eyes dark and narrowed) got in the car and started the engine. "The old bastard wanted to know if the 'young lady' would like a ride."

Pat laughed. "Well?"

"I said no."

She laughed again and crossed her legs, pulling her skirt down; she smoothed her hair into place. "Let's just get home. I want another drink now." Michael smiled at her and put his arm around her shoulders, held her (a small curve, smooth).

They drove slowly, all three watching the road for ice. Finally at Pat's house, they stood on the porch as she searched for the key; and dogs from the neighborhood, aroused by their noisy talk and laughter (How about a shoe through the window? Where's the goddamn key?), began howling, barking at the disturbers of the peace. But eventually she found the key and they almost fell in the door, landing on the couch and laughing.

Soon they moved to the kitchen and sat around the table drinking gin, drinking it quickly, until Michael (with the wine, three at dinner) felt the slippage again, the lightness of the drifting car. He went into the bathroom. (It was like walking on water, sinking in and tilting from one side to the other, rocking slowly.) He waited there for a long while but he wasn't sick. He sat still watching as the tiles on the floor formed new patterns.

When he came back they were talking again (both looking at me, but talking to each other, smiling) and he sat down on the other side of the table. Peter's eyes were red, his dark brows and dark circles making a full ring around his eyes. He leaned across the table to Michael. "You going to be okay?"

Michael nodded. "Maybe we'd better go pretty soon."

But Pat, smiling and her eyelids drooping, said no. "You're too sick. And you're too drunk. You both should stay." She laughed (her head back).

Peter grinned. He reached for Michael's arm with one hand and touched Pat's knee with the other. "Agreed." He turned to Michael and raised his eyebrows in the question.

Michael pretended surprise then turned down the corners of his mouth for Why Not. He shrugged and they had decided to stay.

But no one moved after the decision. No more talk, no drinking, no touch

— they were still, tired and unwilling to make movement.

Finally she spoke, moving no more than her lips. "Well?"

"Let's to bed."

"Yes let's."

But there was still no movement for a few seconds. Then she rose and the other two followed.

In the bedroom they woke a little, fumbling at buttons and belts. The street light came through the curtains and when they finished with their clothes — Michael finished first and studied them carefully (she, thin, her small breasts in a full curve, her stomach smooth and flat; he, thick strong arms and runner's muscles in his legs, his cock beginning to swell forward) — they stood in the blue light.

They shivered. It was cold in the room.

They laughed a little and began to talk as they climbed into bed, Peter first, Pat in the middle. They pulled the quilt to their chins and lay there, warming from it and from each other, talking and laughing.

Michael leaned over and kissed her and moving his hand to stroke her side, he found Peter's there already. They laughed again, almost at ease recognizing three bodies together, touching each other. Or rather two bodies touching a third, for when Michael once stroked Peter's leg (the runner's muscles tense), there was no responding movement and he took away his touch.

They lay like that for a long while, fingering and rubbing her in a crowded way, bumping into each other awkwardly and at awkward times. Pat, with a hand to each, tried to divide her attention, responded alternately as she moved, with a mouth to her mouth and one at her breast.

But it became too much. The only sounds had been rustles of the sheets, but now she began to laugh. "Please. Please, boys. One at a time, one at a time."

They all laughed. Then Peter rolled over with his face to the window. "Have fun, kiddies. Wake me when it's my turn." Soon his breaths were long and slow and he moved only slightly.

Michael turned onto his side and kissed her, his mouth open and tongue running across her lips until he felt her open too, his tongue sliding and darting at hers. His hands slid across the small firm curves, across the skin to coarse thick hair (and to the warm, moist warmth). She moved to it, to the warmth, her mouth to his.

She threw back the cover: it was cool in the room still. She bent down (her hair brushed my stomach) and he could feel his own hardness. Then her kiss. She lowered the kiss around him (warm around me and moving on me); he could see her head move in the bluish light. He felt the movement, the warm mouth of it (I felt my own hardness), but there was no push. He tensed his legs and tried to push, but there was only the warmth and the hardness. He lay still and watched her head move, watching from a distance.

Until he knew she was tired, that she was wondering. He held her shoulders, pulling her up to his face, and kissed her, pressed her mouth firmly. "Wake Peter for a while. We'll try later."

She nodded, smiling, then kissed him again.

Peter had been sleeping deeply, his liquor helped him sleep, but she woke him. He rolled over, rubbed his eyes and kissed her.

Michael lay back, looking around the room (lighted by blue light, with dark blue shadows). There were only soft noises (unmoving) from them, but soon there was a rustle and flailing. He turned to see — he started — a pale blue-skinned creature (with two heads moving, waving like cobras) writhing on the bed beneath the window. Then one of the heads lay still and moaned quietly. The other continued to move.

Later Michael kissed her goodnight and tried to sleep, lying on his side facing the room. He slept for a while, but they woke him once more in the middle of the night.

February 27, 1973

"She's gone to her sister's wedding. She just asked me to water the plants and feed the dog." Peter slid into the driver's seat and leaned across to unlock Michael's door. He fumbled at the ignition as he turned to Michael, smiling at him (thin lips pulled back from his teeth, big teeth, yellow). Both men smelled of beer. "It'll only take a minute and then I'll take you home. School night and all that."

Michael laughed, remembering school nights from his father. — He reached for the defroster, flipping it on to warm his hands. — The speeches had been of those "for your own good," delivered quickly and somewhat awkwardly (insincerely). He had thought about that delivery and wondered if his father had wanted to give the speeches (any talking) at all.

"Didn't Pat tell you she was going?" Michael shook his head. "She left yesterday. She promised to bring us souvenirs. The wedding's in Florida. Probably sea shells. Or oranges. My parents always brought back oranges. Oh, but Pat's sister sent me a pen once, this ball-point pen with women on it, these real bathing beauties that when you turn it upside down, the tops of their bathing suits fall down." He laughed, slapping the wheel with his amusement, his hair in his eyes. "It was great. I took it to all the boring classes I had."

Michael laughed too, wishing that Peter hadn't told him about it, but wishing that he could see the pen. They pulled up in front of Pat's house.

"You want to come in or wait in the car?"

"I'll go in. By the time you finish I'd freeze my ass off." They got out and went to the door. The dog jumped up, enthusiastic to see them. Peter unlocked the door. "Jesus. These plants are going to curl up and die in here. She must've cut off the heat."

Michael dropped into a chair, a heavy red armchair with gold threads in it. He faced a fireplace with dark streaks of smoke on its gray stone: the wood already laid — for decoration; rustic. "How about a fire? Nothing so lovely as a fire in February." He got up, feeling pleased with his idea, and found some newspapers. "Hey, Pete. How about a fire?"

Peter was in the kitchen searching for the dog food. "What? Oh. Okay, but I thought you had classes tomorrow."

"I do, but a *fire*. A fire and music and whiskey. The only February way." Excited now, he began looking around the house for liquor. He found it and fixed drinks, loaded as many records on the stereo as it would hold, and lit the fire. He sat on the floor in front of it and leaned against the chair.

Peter was moving around the room watering plants. From the floor Michael watched him, reached for his leg. "Come sit down. February fire." He felt his face warming at the fire, feeling his skin stretched and hot.

"Just a minute. I need to get the ones in the bedroom." Michael held to his ankle. "Come on. There's only a few."

He let go. A slower, cool burning in his throat from the whiskey. He watched him still: the big man, bigger from the floor, (the gymnast) carrying a little plastic watering can to all the plants. Michael laughed and turned to watch the fire. He could close his eyes and feel only the thin heat of his skin.

Finally Peter came back. Reaching for his drink, he sat down beside Michael. The fire, either by its light or by its heat, reddened his face, made him look tired and older.

Closing his eyes again, Michael settled back against the chair. He spoke slowly. "You know, we used to have fires like this, sit around the fireplace, when I was little. Pop-corn sometimes. Marshmallows." He paused, turning his face to one side, away from the thickening heat. "And when we stopped eating, my father would throw some pine cones on the fire. They'd been treated with copper and chemicals and stuff so that they'd make the fire burn in different colors. All different colors. The copper made it green I know. But," he laughed, "I bet I was nine or ten years old before I knew that all pine cones didn't do that."

The logs of the fire shifted, throwing sparks. Peter leaned forward to put on a new log.

They sat like that for a long while, drinking and staring at the fire, until the stereo clicked off, its second maybe third playing of the records. They could hear the dull buzzing of a motorcycle not far away. But they stayed there, talking occasionally with comfortable silence between. Until Michael (the warm light, the slow almost-whiskey of the talk) was asleep.

He woke with a start as Peter stood, trying to be quiet but bumping the chair Michael was leaning against.

"I'm sorry. I was going to try to not wake you up." He bent over, his hair in his eyes and swinging down.

"I wasn't asleep." Michael was suddenly insistent. "I wasn't asleep."

Peter laughed, swaying slightly. "Okay. But anyway, let's get to bed before you're 'not asleep' like that again. Come on. We can just stay here and get home in the morning." His voice was thick, drunken. He leaned, rocking, to help Michael up. Michael picked up his coat from the floor and they went into the bedroom.

Michael undressed and climbed into bed, the cold of the room sobering him a little.

Peter found his way to the bathroom and came back a few minutes later. "Jesus am I wrecked. Sweet Jesus."

Michael rolled over to see him, sitting on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands: blue from the light. "You need some help getting ready for bed?"

"Nope. I'm fine. Just turn over and go to sleep."

But he couldn't get his boots off, so Michael got up and unlaced them. While he was working on one knot, Peter reached down and patted him on the head, stroking his hair (strong hands). "You're a good friend. A nice fire. You're a good friend." Michael helped him with his shirt and trousers and then got back into bed. Peter lay beside him, laughing quietly.

"What's funny now?"

"Oh, the fire and the copper pine cones. A nice fire even without the green." He laughed again.

Michael stared out the window at the light and smiled secretly, not wanting him to see. "Goodnight, Pete." He didn't want to sleep now; he wanted to watch the fire.

Then Peter reached over and patted him on the head again, telling him he was a good friend, a good friend, his best friend.

Michael wondered at the gesture. "You're a good friend too, Pete." He clapped Peter's shoulder with one hand. "Night." He spoke in a toneless voice: intentionally toneless, remembering the copper fire, the ladies on the ball-point pen from Florida.

But when he started to roll back, Peter held Michael's hand on his shoulder and laughed again. Michael rubbed the shoulder and wondered. Soon the laughter stopped. He felt himself stiffen (there had been the two touching another one); he began to stroke Peter's shoulder and chest softly: smooth skin but not soft. Deep breathing. As he wondered (my hardness now; there had always been two touching one) and listened to the breaths, he smoothed the chest and felt the muscles in the stomach tense. (There had been three and no push.) He moved to the cloth around Peter's waist, feeling Peter breathing quickly and shallowly. And Michael felt his own push as he moved to feel at the cotton, at the cloth as his hand slipped under the elastic, finally under the cloth to push, to stroke the coarse hair. He pushed to touch. Then there was a sudden ache, the real ache at the softness (there were two and no . . .).

Peter caught his breath, gasping, and shoved Michael's hand away. Michael could hear him fumble for his boots, fit them on and then go into the

front room. He paced — his steps were heavy, even on the rugs — for a few minutes and then it was quiet. When Michael went in the next morning Peter was asleep on the couch, wearing his underwear and his unlaced boots.

January 20, 1973

As he drove, Michael watched in the mirror for the police cars and flashing blue lights he knew would come and he rehearsed his lines, saying them out loud to the empty car. "Yes I know I was going too fast. Yes seventy-five or eighty. But I still won't make it. It'll be too late when I get there, now get out of my way." He went faster.

His mother had called him: at four o'clock in the morning a boy from the other end of the hall — red-eyed from sleep and wearing only wrinkled pajama bottoms — had opened the door to announce the phone call and then slammed the door loudly. He was gone by the time Michael stumbled down the hall to the phone (to my father: I have dreamed that I slaughtered him with a telephone).

It was a heart attack. Like his mother's father, who had collapsed into a snow drift the year before.

Critical, she said and asked Michael if he could come. He had not yet understood the message but he had been irritated at the question.

It had been an hour and a half. Now he was driving — driving only straight ahead, inattentively — and it was getting light. "The most dangerous time to drive is at dusk or dawn. Driver's Education class." His father had told him that, too. Eighty-five miles per hour. He slowed to eighty.

But his father had been strong: he used to exercise before work; he'd been captain of the basketball team in college.

College was twenty-eight years ago.

"But he still played some when I went to school. He'd shoot in the driveway and try to rope me into playing." He'd been big all the time, even after Michael had grown. He still seemed big. He'd given Michael a basketball once and had been disappointed when Michael didn't play. He used it often, but always put it back in Michael's closet.

"If I'd been bigger . . ." Michael let the sentence trail off.

There was suddenly — frighteningly — a large slow truck, a milk truck, in the road before him. He cursed at it and passed it quickly, without glancing back.

Heart. He was forty-seven.

Michael had stumbled to the phone and his mother, a childish tone in her voice, had said only, "Hello? Are you all right?" Which had been two hours ago. He'd run back to his room, crying and screaming at his roommate. "I've got to go. My mother. My father's sick. Where are my keys? Where are my goddamned keys?"

His roommate had awakened quickly and calmly; he told Michael to slow down and helped him get dressed, talking to him, talking quietly. Michael had screamed some more, but his roommate stayed quiet. He made him splash with cold water to wake up and had instructed him about driving carefully, no hysterics. He had walked Michael to the car. And now at six a.m. he was back in bed and asleep (goddamn him. Goddamn him).

"But he was only forty-seven. Twenty — twenty-seven left. Twenty-six next month. Jesus. My birthday."

Once, birthdays ago, his grandmother had asked him what he wanted that year and he had requested a bride doll. He had asked her because he had known she wouldn't mind. But she'd told his parents and his father had gotten upset. Michael knew he was angry by the way he talked — an unnatural tightness in his voice. His father had explained that little boys didn't play with dolls; and even though Michael knew he was angry, he'd answered that *he* wanted to play with one. His grandmother — he remembered mostly the light smell of talcum and the vinyl touch of her skin — had given him one, a bride doll with lace, and he did play with it, though never where his father could see.

It was almost light and the sky was clear. (A beautiful day. Jesus.)

Eighty-five. He accelerated to ninety, with the beginning of a prayer, which turned into a howl.

He was forty-seven. He had talked of retiring early because his job was too much work. But he'd stayed late a lot and Michael and his mother ate dinner downstairs and watched the news on television as they ate. His father would work overtime and Michael would have to go to bed (past your bedtime) and ask his mother to have his father wake him when he got in.

Michael knew that his father still worked late. His mother, too, now.

He needed gas and began to look for a station that might be open, but it was still too early. Stations would open around seven, when the traffic began — factory workers mostly, and school buses. Now the road was empty.

Ray Craven's mother had died a year ago. But she'd died over the summer and Ray was home already and didn't have to leave school. Linda Jarrett's father had died her senior year in high school. And Carla Brame's father had died when she was eight; she'd missed so much school that year that she'd had to start third grade over again with a new class full of younger children. Joel Winn's sister had leukemia.

Michael wondered what they would say at the hospital. With his mother (Sweet bleeding Jesus, tell me what to say to my mother.). She would be standing outside a door marked Coronary Unit or something equally anonymous. Her eyes would be red and from inside the door there would be the clicks and beeps of a heart monitor, the rush of some sort of machine to keep his father breathing. She would see Michael get off the elevator and he would have nothing to say. He might stammer as he always did when he tried to talk to his parents about something important: He used to stammer

and stand with his hand in his pocket, pulling at his penis, until his father asked him if he needed to go to the bathroom or if he itched and needed a bath; and sometimes his father had become enraged at the speechless, jerking figure and yelled, "Stop scratching yourself," and Michael had been unable to finish talking at all.

A gas station. Michael stopped and a man in overalls and a blue cap came out to fill the tank as Michael walked around and stretched. The attendant said something about the weather, but Michael pretended not to hear and the man didn't try again. Michael paid and drove away. Back to ninety.

When he got to the hospital — a tall building with long, thin windows which looked down at the parking lot as if from a tower — the receptionist and nurses were bright and cordial to him; so he was surprised when one of them said that his father was still critical and then disappeared, smiling. She went for his mother who was in the room. Ten Minutes Each Hour. Immediate Family and Clergy Only Please.

His mother smiled at him, too, and took his hand as she sat down on a wooden bench outside the room. Her hair was gray and cut short and was tied back with a blue kerchief, a style she usually saved for housework, gardening. She wore no makeup and her eyes were red and tired, wrinkled at the corners and puffy. There was no sign of tears, only lack of sleep.

She looked straight ahead without focusing her stare. "He's been conscious the whole time. I think you should go see him." Her voice was strained, whining.

"Of course I will. Can I go in now?"

"I think so." She looked around confusedly, searching for the nurse. "Go on in." She squeezed his hand and let go.

He pushed the door gently; it swung open without sound. The room was pale green. Amid tubes and coiled wires, his father lay still, his head propped up with two pillows. A screen over his head flashed and beeped at his pulse. He looked old and weak, but he seemed big even in the shapeless green hospital gown. The nurse was changing bottles at the ends of the tubes.

Michael leaned near the bed, looking into his father's face. It seemed gray and formless, slipping gradually down into the head and pillow behind it, as if there were no muscle under the skin.

Michael cleared his throat. "I'm here."

His father looked slowly over to him and smiled. Then he spoke, a whisper almost without sound. Michael couldn't understand him and moved nearer, bending over the bed, his ear close to his father's face. But the older man closed his eyes and the nurse motioned for Michael to leave.

Out in the hall his mother was praying. She had taken the kerchief off and was twisting it nervously, her face turned down. He sat beside her on the bench. She stopped in a few seconds and smiled, reaching for his hand

again. "I'm glad you could come."

"Of course I came." Michael's voice was irritated, but he quickly changed. "He recognized me."

"He's been conscious all along. I can see when it hurts him . . . I'm glad you came." She began to pray again, still holding his hand.

A little later the doctor came and said there was no change. He knew Michael and asked about school and shook his hand as he left.

But soon the nurse called them from the hallway, urgently — Come now. When they went in, his father was breathing quickly and shallowly. Fluid was collecting in the chest after the coronary and breathing was difficult, the heart weak. Under the night's growth of beard his father's skin was bluish-gray, smoke-colored. The doctor came. Breath in. Out. Quickly. (And I caught my own breath, trying to breathe for him; filling my chest until I had a cartoon vision of my inflated lungs exploding and sending me flying all around the room.) Then there was a jerk (There had been days, big beautiful clear-skied days when I went with him in the car on long afternoon rides, when he would draw in his breath as if beginning a new topic and then, while I waited, ready to nod in agreement or look out the window at what he had seen, he would change his mind and say nothing at all.), and his neck arched back, his face to the ceiling (I said, "Wait a minute," but nobody heard me.) and there was no more breath.

(I saw myself tearing at the doctor, tearing at his genitals, tearing at his mouth.)

Azoturia (Monday Morning Sickness)

Great Grandfather logged the Great Green Swamp in the nineties
for six successive days in lots of just enough mule-acres
that light was struck on the first day out
for drag paths to be followed in the dawn.
The dayless week left bruises from the chains and harness
and splinter clearings pocked by softening boots and hooves
till late mid-Saturday night in low half rhythms of fatigue they came:
low and heavy in the dark yard, two hundred stabling slaps and rumblings,
the counting partings, then the door.
Most spaving hocks legged through the heat
and deadly weeks on into fall
when the stabled hundred brace could stir for good
between the low manure-splattered slats of summer Sundays.
Always before first frost Grandfather shot one old or spavined mule
a day until the ground froze hard
and hired a Negro in this season to gaff the yard-long tendons, dig
the day-long graves.
Among my earliest memories are waking to bacon and the morning gun
and the Christmas auction where he replenished his stable and I was
taken every year.

Sacrum, sacrum

inluminatio coitu,* and in
all things I want more than mere knowledge
of characteristics learned from books and men.
I always crave the galactic light-filled act.

In the churning sea of knowledge I was
conceived. Timidity slept, and the
necessary angel fled before some
more demanding demon, a clearer need.

* "A sacred thing, a sacred thing,
the cognition of coition"

Ezra Pound, *Canto 36*

Aunt Bessie and Aunt Idie

I

I still remember clearly that the day
Was shower-drenched, a Sunday late in May,
And that the sun was covered by gray clouds
Until, oh, three or four that afternoon.
The family talked, and as it wove its shrouds
My spine was strangely chilled with soft, new warmth.
Adults and children clustered at our car
To say goodbye and, awkward, to attune,
While, oddly, none but I saw that the sun
Had brightened, brought to sparkling life the lawn,
The maples, most of all the peonies,
A lovely, luscious mass of mortal pink
And rose-red spheres that hang as full and fresh
For me today as on that day in May.
Aunt Bessie's goitered neck and piled-up hair,
Her steady eyes, her big and shapeless dress,
Her air of calm assurance, country strength,
Grow gray and nebulous as passing years
(I think I never saw her any more),
Preserved now mainly in a photograph
Which I keep somewhere in an attic box.
But Bessie's peonies are still as fine
As any spheres that I can call to mind.

II

I saw Aunt Idie only once, I think.
She stood outside her clapboard country house,
A faded bonnet shading all her face
(My grandma had one, too, for gardening).
She stood to talk with us and say goodbye,
One restless, birdlike hand upon the fence.
The bright November sun helped counteract
The cold but gentle wind that glided down
Across the stubbled cornfields and the road
My father had to drive to take us home.
We huddled coolly close beneath that sky,
And all the while I watched the shriveled hand
Grasp lightly, rise a bit, then fall again,
And sometimes pick a bit at blackened threads
Of sweet pea vine that twirled about the bars,
Themselves askew with age but blacksmith strong.
We shivering laughed and hugged and said goodbye
And finally climbed into the car again.
Although no photograph survives today
(It may be we forgot the camera),
The image of that shriveled hand and vine
Upon the wrought iron fence in Idie's yard
Is clear as winter sunlight in my head,
Much clearer, sure, than are the words we said.

III

What child has come, I wonder, to my hill
 And looked at my dull thatch and failed to see
 The shreds of hope and pride, the ties that bind,
 The ill-patched thoughts that make my paradigm,
 The myriad grasshopper elements
 That constitute the grassplot that is I,
 And seen instead, perhaps, a rascal squirrel
 Twitch twice, then race away in great-arched bounds,
 A ripe and perfect apple in his teeth,
 Or possibly a flash of orange orf
 Between anacharis fronds deep in the pond,
 Or, it may be, a single iris stalk
 Whose cool blue light shines clear beneath a pine?
 Of course, he might see other sights as well.
 No need to hide them here — a broken gate,
 A glum girl disappointed with her day,
 A smile of wire that menaces tall men
 But tolerates a row of raucous birds.
 Admittedly I load my arc with things
 The quiddity of which I'd have him see,
 My hypothetical, observing child.
 Whatever he sees clear, I might tell him,
 He'll likely end with pictures of himself,
 And given just a summer's breath of time
 It's all but certain that I'll be as dim
 And gray in his still-bright, prismatic eye
 As two old aunts who in my mind now die.

Le poète se paraphrase

The season ends in fire, the leaves
are burned, and stalks of corn,
a few each day, are fed to the cattle;
their breath fogs in the air,
and smoke means fire.

An old man told me, a child: "Cows have four stomachs" —
one stomach per element, and one is for fire;
fire and air grow one horn,
earth and water the other —
the soul is in each.

If I joke and say
I will take the cow by both horns, I mean
the universe and its dilemmas.
One horn, and I write poetry;
the other, I am religious;
but now I take both.

"Wife," I whisper in bed,
"By these horns I am thrown as high as the moon"
—a horned moon, I mean — and then I whisper
a few words of fire and then
it's time for sleep.

Two Poems

Helen Bevington

The Leaning Lady

To climb the Leaning Tower like Galileo,
I left the perpendicular at Pisa
And, listing and diagonal, barely made it
Up to the turret of the seven bells,
Where at the top leaned one Italian woman
Alone in splendor, beaming at Tuscany
Below and the far distant Apennines.
Her face was drowned in sweat. She panted hard
After the struggle up the *torre pendente*
For, being pregnant as she clearly was,
Her own small center of gravity askew,
She leaned obliquely, very like the tower
(Now seventeen feet off center and still slipping)
But backward, in the opposite direction.
The way both tilted really staggered me,
Yet I felt proud of her and that triumphant
Climb in the golden steps of Galileo.
She would get down all right. And so would I.

Sister Kate

She has two brothers, slightly older,
 And a sister Sarah, only three.
 With boys she's brave as nails to climb trees,
 Make tigers tame, or bait a fishhook
 To catch leviathans for supper.
 She rides with centaurs, runs with lemmings,
 And walks with unicorns, her weapon
 Against alarms or armadillos
 (Or her two brothers, slightly older)
 Being a piercing scream the like of
 Which not this side of Hell's own gate
 Is screamed except by Sister Kate.

And yet with Sarah, only three,
 Kate's putty in her hands. Together
 They play Rapunzel or Godiva,
 Two Hecates, two hobbyhorses,
 Two Princes in the Tower, whatever,
 Till Sarah starts to scream — from boredom,
 For mastery, for the joy of screaming —
 And pummeling, scratching, howling, brawling,
 "Damn you!" she falls upon her sister,
 Who laughs out loud and hugs the roarer.
 "I love you," Kate says, kissing Sarah.
 "O.K.?" And Sarah answers, "Yeah."

A Place to Lie Down

The syllables of the name rolled rhythmically out of the roar of the water. . . par . . . *ra* . . . doe . . . par . . . *ra* . . . doe . . . It was not his name but it woke him, lifting his eyes open to the light. The ground quivered like a dying fish and he looked down at his arms that clasped his chest tightly, with a will of their own. He should not be completely naked, not naked and alone like this, his body, rabbit-quick, convulsing into the corner of rock and earth. He could only control his head, to lift it and hear . . . par . . . *ra* . . . doe . . . par . . . *ra* . . . doe . . . Then he saw his clothes scattered at the foot of his sleeping bag, as if stripped away by the night. But his bag was only a vapor, a faint steam rising from his skin, disappearing into the air. The spray from the river had dissolved everything, clothes and tent and bag, and now his body was evaporating before his eyes. He pulled blankets over himself but each time they slipped from his grip, a playful dog at his feet snatching them away in a tug of war. . . . par . . . *ra* . . . doe . . . par . . . *ra* . . . doe . . . He knew he had heard the name somewhere before.

The sun rose high enough above the river canyon to finally touch his full length. He lay under it, the weight of its increasing closeness pressing him firmly, sandbagging his limbs, slowing the convulsions. He remembered his motorcycle, green and yellow, parked with two others at the trail head. Then the straps of his pack numbing his shoulders. A porcupine crossed his path; bushes snared his fishing net. Before he fished he knelt by a pool and watched the frantic salmon. Their heads were green and their flanks orange-red, mottled white with tattered fins and tails, hunchbacked with spectral mouths, jagged and frowning. Then he and the others hiked downstream for the fresher run, along the river bank that grew to sheer echoing walls. The water was white with fume and pale blue with light, like the cloud-moving sky he could see now. He remembered Brad leaning over a sluice of strong current, awkward and stumbling in his waders, positive he was going to fall in, thinking he would have to grab him as the river took him by. Then his own footing crumbled and he swam in it, the shock of the glacial coldness sucking his breath away. It was like a long skid on his bike, being taken over and under, not slowing for obstacles or sudden turns, a merciless revenge of power.

Clouds diffused the sun, and he bent down to his feet and put on his poncho, almost torn in half. It burned at first like cold metal, then he felt a strange radiance around his hips and shoulders. He remembered the

piercing cold and the sudden silencing of the roar when he went under. His jaw hurt and he held its jackhammering in his hand. Finally the full weight of the sun returned and for an instant the drone stopped in his head. Nando — he almost spoke it — it went with par-ra-doe. Nando Parrado was the full name he remembered before his own.

Slowly he took control of his shivering until the seizures only burst sporadically. He remembered that Nando Parrado had a sister; but he kept trying to think if he were hurt anywhere, if he could walk. She had made all the difference, Nando's sister. He had read about them in a book . . . survival. Nando Parrado had survived. 'I come from a plane that fell from the sky.' He remembered his sister had died — not his but Parrado's. Also his mother, Parrado's mother had died. His own mother and sister were alive and that was the book . . . *Alive*. But it made no difference, knowing they were alive. He did not want to get up and walk out of the canyon. The pain came only now and then, with his sudden shivers. So why should he? Nando had watched his sister die and then was determined to survive. His own sister was a strong swimmer. She would not have let the river take her down this far. He remembered as a child listening to her heart, like stone dropping on stone. His, he could feel it, was soft and soaked. Soon it would freeze. 'I came from a fool that fell into the river.' He wanted to laugh.

The sun made the poncho a cocoon of warmth, contentment more perfect than sleep slipping him back into the current, tobogganing, making him nauseous. He opened his eyes again and saw the bright rock and glistening brush of the canyon, the blinding slot of sky. Why should he move at all? Who said he must move? Only his sister and Nando — no, his two friends, Brad and John would find him, his legs broken, his face bloodless as the belly of a trout. There was a crippled boy in a pool once and he had watched him swim with his seaweed-limp legs. So even if he couldn't move he could swim. In the picture in the book Nando stood as wide as a fir, a soccer player posing before the goal posts. He had legs. What legs Nando had. And his sister's, from swimming, years of training, legs bowed with muscle like the back of a porpoise. But his own were useless, frozen sticks in his hips of warmth. Without his legs who would expect him to survive?

He waited and tried not to fight the sickening sense of sweetness, to let the sun seal his eyes and hold him under. But he floated awake each time with one more argument to discard. He could not roll in the water and swim. There was no safety downstream, only wilderness and a wide maw of river. Who bothered him with such ideas? Someone was watching him, waking and prodding. They could help; didn't they see he needed help? He called out. The sound of his voice startled him. It reminded him he had not tried to move.

The sun slid past the canyon's rim and he stood at once in panic, his legs solid but unfeeling underneath him. His torn poncho flapped open and the moist pall of shadow and spray sent new shivers through his knees, across

his shoulders. He moved out of the shade to the very edge of the gravel bank and stood relieved for moments until that patch of sunlight rolled from his neck and head. With an outstretched hand he could touch the moving light; then that too was gone, though the water was still as bright as fire and the opposite canyon wall gleamed hot as chrome. For seconds the water was fordable, his only way back under the warmth of the sun. One step brought him ankle-deep in an eddy and he leapt back from the cold, shaking his foot free of the water. He looked down at himself, his buttocks exposed by the breeze, and wondered why he had taken off his clothes, every stitch, even his socks. Where were his socks? He went back to his clothes and found his shirt and pants, dropping them quickly: they were as cold as the water he had just stepped in. He lifted his down vest cautiously, thinking for a moment it was the carcass of a drowned animal. His socks and shoes were lost and the sun was disappearing. Whoever had watched him, he too was moving over the rim into the trees that splayed the sun into a fan over the canyon. They had left him behind, Nando and his sister, giving him up for dead.

The path he thought he had seen was a rivulet, quiet and cold as a snake sidewinding down the canyon wall. He climbed it astraddle, hoisting himself with bushes, against jutting rock. He watched the clear spine of water as if it would suddenly lap at his feet or splash his face. He continued to climb and realized his right leg trembled under the slightest strain. He was breathing hard and no longer felt numb, composed of floating hips and shoulders. If there were only a level rock or ledge to sit down on and think. He needed rest; he needed to think. Why was he climbing; what was over the top? On all fours, clinging, he looked down below him. Half a rainbow hung in the mist. How had he made it this far?

If he could lie down again he would be all right. The climb was foolish and futile; he was angry he had ever started, angry he couldn't remember why he had. His scalp prickled with sweat but he couldn't scratch it. He didn't dare let one of his hands free; he wasn't sure exactly how steep the grade was — it seemed to pitch under him. He wanted to go back and lie beneath the rainbow, let them find him serene, not struggling with cut feet, dirty knees and elbows. But he was over halfway up. He had no choice but to continue.

He lost his balance and landed a foot on the slick purple bed of the rivulet. The bush in his hand uprooted and he backslid to an outcropping of rock, swearing until he was secure once again. He wiped his mouth and looked at the blood on his hand, foreign and beautiful. He licked the wetness from his lips and swallowed thickly.

He wanted this to be over. It didn't matter if he were clothed and warm. He wanted it to be over as quickly as possible, even if that meant dying, because dying could be no worse than he felt. With a cupped hand he took a drink to clear his throat. He felt the water branch in his chest. He sat in an immaculate pastel kitchen, the cabinets and table glowing clean, the refrigerator purring. There was a glass of milk in his hand and someone behind him opened the

oven door, releasing a delicious just-baked aroma. The person, a soothing woman, was saying, 'You've had a bad experience. Be calm and eat this. Eat slowly, don't talk. You'll be all right.' This, he knew, would only make his climb more painful. He would not think of being rescued. That would be infinitely slow, arduous, waiting and hoping at once.

After another drink he continued, thinking that he could rest, lie down and maybe sleep, once he reached the top where the trees baffled the sun. It would be drier above and the ground would be softer. At the very lip of the canyon heather began to appear and there were wide patches of lush moss cushioning his feet. Relieved but anxious he scrambled over the last of the incline until he could stand. Then he collapsed on the tundra and closed his eyes, breathing deeply through his mouth.

The dizzy, nauseous contentment returned, settling over him like a gauze; then the wind, stronger and more sporadic, would blow it away, a snow-white cocoon tumbling back into the canyon. He remembered from the book those buried in the avalanche, lying in the broken body of the airplane under the pressing weight of yards of snow. It must have been warm under the snow, like the sun. He thought of the sun, its back rolling over him. Some could thrust their hands above the snow, making frantic signals to those who dug. But he would have been content to lie immobile under the furry heavy blanket, a white beast that even crawled in his ears, content to lie and wait without struggle.

But when the wind died, he could sink for only moments before whining voices woke him. He felt pricks over his hands and ankles. He kept trying to find the soft groove in his mind where he had lain before. It was useless. They would not leave him alone. He sat up flailing at the swarming mosquitos. Then the wind came blustering through the trees and he drew his legs against his chest, trying to batten the torn poncho over his nakedness.

Why was he not interested in this? Why didn't he care? This meant his life. Where was the will to survive that was supposed to bubble in his blood, rise to the surface no matter what his condition? He was alone, there was no one else to help. Nando had had the weakness of the others to spur him. He wouldn't have done as much for himself, alone. He looked through the trees at the sun. That was why he had climbed out of the canyon . . . for warmth. So he was fending for himself; there was something that wanted to continue. But why did it seem such a small part, like a rodent caged in his stomach? Why couldn't he put his whole being in the cause . . . warmth, shelter, food?

First he would find a spot of sunlight, then he would have to break the wind. He scooted around the bright trunk of a spruce, trying to find leeward, feeling foolish, huddling, unsure what direction the gusts of wind came from. He tried to slow his stumbling thoughts, start from the beginning. What did he need most? Warmth, more than a patch of sunlight. There was a word, he could almost remember, for his condition, slurred speech, disorientation, delusion. *Mary had a little lamb, its feet were white as snow.*

That was wrong. Or was it? Yes, and the word meant the body was losing its heat, first very slowly then faster and faster. It would kill you even if you were a hunter in coat and hat. He remembered the pictures, the cover of the pamphlet saying, WARNING: THE QUIET KILLER.

He needed his clothes. He would spread them out to dry in the sun. Put your head between your knees. No that was for feeling faint. Then lie down with your feet uphill, have someone cover you with a blanket and explain that you are in shock. There was so much survival lore he could suddenly remember. It seemed he had done nothing all his life but be lectured — *How To Survive*. He should cover his head. The axiom was: when your feet are cold cover your head. And when lost stay put. Let them find you. But who? Were Brad and John on their bikes making their way down river? He swatted mosquitos away from his ears and tried to listen for the sputtering engines. Hadn't he heard them earlier? Was that a dream or had they passed by him? Perhaps the water had not taken him far, only around the bend, a few hundred yards. Then he would look for them — easy as that. But he did hear the sound of an engine in the canyon. Stay put.

The bikes or a boat? Not a boat in those rapids, not the bikes in the riprap of that river bank. The grinding grew louder, echoing less and less. He walked to the edge of the canyon, squatted, waiting for it to appear. He felt strangely protective, more suspicious than hopeful. It was his canyon, his vale of trees. Who wanted him? Then he saw the white wings of the plane, its red body, the wheelstruts like stiff claws. It was too high to be looking for him, but he stood and waved like a tourist wishing bon voyage. Soon it was only a faint X in the sky, a wavering echo. He cupped his hands and shouted Help! Help! Help! The overlapping sound filled the air, his voice answering itself. He tried again, three bursts, mocking him. But no reply. Silence, the water, a few birds, mosquitos. Always three, he remembered. Three of anything — stones along a path, sticks in the ground — three meant help, SOS. Any Boy Scout would remember.

He sat down and drew his legs against his chest, wrapping the poncho tightly. The rainbow in the canyon had disappeared; the river was now entirely in shadow, its brilliant spray no longer spectacular but monotonously cold and indifferent. He could not go back down for his clothes or try and find his pack. There was no one watching him now; they had abandoned him with the plane. The canyon was empty; no one hid behind the trees; the distant green and snow-tasseled peaks were barren, not even the fleck of sheep on their slopes. He was alone. It was unimportant what he did. The idea of struggling was pathetic; Nando's persistence was insane. This seemed a natural end, a rest more than an end. What could he do, anyway, that he was not doing? Who made him feel guilty that he did not stand and beat on his chest, grovel for food, strike stones together for the spark of a fire?

There were people who should be there, should be watching. His sister at

college in Denver. But she was very busy, unaware of anything but the tiled, echoing room, swimming mile after mile in the pool, her eyes hardly open under the goggles, seeing nothing. She did not think of him because she knew he was far away, safe in an office, her brother a graphic designer. And his mother probably at the kitchen table talking on the phone, the schedule of swim meets on the bulletin board behind her, out-of-town dates ticked with a laundry marker. Maybe she was writing him a letter, telling him of his sister's times, so much cut off her hundred-meter backstroke or crawl, so much to go before she would break such and such record. Only seconds, their lives were seconds, stopwatches and buses all over the state. 'You'll have to come to the Conference Meet. Your sister will be swimming her heart out.' His sister was like Nando, a blind purpose lodged somewhere in her will.

Elaine would even try to help him now, if she knew. She wouldn't stand for him shivering, waiting. 'Do something,' she said. But she was out of his life; he wished her out of his mind. She would make him a survivor the way she had made him a husband. But he had had no talent for it, no interest in it. Underneath her blue bandana was that uncrushable skull. A crushproof wife, a good investment. Investment, future: two of her favorite words. He couldn't conceive of future now. It was the same as missing a shot when he was bow hunting with Brad and John. The time wasted trying to find the arrow: that was future, something quickly out of your hands, lost. But Elaine, the way she walked, her nose tilted to the horizon as if she were on a scent. 'Here, follow me, you don't need to lead, I'll take you.' He didn't want to go. He was happy here. Where? 'Use your talent, God gave you a talent to draw. At least do that for me.' He tried for her, several paintings, failures, but good enough to attempt his own, what he wanted and felt. Facing the canvas, a sleepwalker or self-hypnotist, he would get drowsy, his legs rubbery, weak, the brush heavy as a hammer in his hand. He wanted to rest and sleep, find a clearing full of sunlight away from the mosquitos where he could lie down and wait. But Elaine walking some street right now in Seattle would not want him to wait. Stay put was the rule; let them find you. It didn't matter. She would lift her nose to the wind and start back upstream along the river, doggedly following the canyon, trusting she would find Brad and John. But he knew better than she what that would be like . . . dense alder and more roused and voracious mosquitos. But worse would be stopping, listening to the silence, wondering if you were lost. He wasn't lost now; couldn't Elaine see that? He hadn't been lost for hours.

He had stopped shivering. Was that good? Didn't he remember that shivering was an involuntary defense, stimulating body heat? His body would take care of itself. He needed only to think, to choose between finding a clearing, more sun, warmth, or hiking up river in hopes of meeting Brad and John, his old life, empty, almost proudly empty. He liked the idea of his disappearance; it seemed to make his past more complete, meaningful — the better part of his life left to the imagination of others. The plans he had made

since divorcing Elaine were sterile, involving only himself. He had been brainwashed by her feminine conviction that nothing of importance happened except between two people, couples and families. Since leaving her his main ambition had been to kill a bear with a bow and arrow, to track it and fell it with one shot through its lungs. But that was planned as much for Brad and John as himself, to become a hunter in their eyes. He could not think of anything he had done alone, solely out of a deep need in himself. Elaine had made up half of his need of her, just as he was half brother and son out of expectancy, duty. There was a chance now to do only what he felt, what his body and mind told him.

The stream that led him out of the canyon would also lead him to a clearing. He followed it through the stunted spruce and spongy tundra. His feet were now skinned and raw, the smallest rock or twig causing his legs to buckle. There was another rule he could remember. It seemed he would not be free until he could remember the rules he was breaking. Never follow water upstream; but he wasn't sure why. It wouldn't matter now. There was no need to argue anymore. He had said that to Elaine many times.

The trees were beginning to thin. Or were they? There seemed to be more light. He could feel warmth, like someone's hands on his chest and hips. The walking was warming him, but he was getting more and more tired and dizzy. He needed food. He had not thought once of food, and when he did now his stomach contracted and cramped. How long had it been? Only a little over a day? He dropped to his knees by the stream and noticed for the first time a trail of moose tracks embossed in its soft banks. They looked like open mussel shells littering the water. He watched the stream, enthralled. Then a breeze ended his reverie. What was he doing? Looking for food, for fish? He remembered the river and its boiling pools of salmon. He could almost net them from the bank, pull them out by their tails, eat them raw if he had to. But the river was behind him; he couldn't hear it any longer. He had gone through miles and miles of trees it seemed, carefully taking the left fork of the stream, then the right, alternating to keep from going in circles. He turned over a rock and found a small snail. With a twig he gouged out the meat. He looked at it globbed on the end of the stick, not wanting it but knowing this was what he was expected to do. He put it in his mouth and chewed quickly. It was tasteless, gritty. He took some water and it hurt to swallow it. His tongue seemed thick, swollen and unmanageable. He held it between his fingers and tried to look at it down his nose. All he could see was a smear of blood on his upper lip. He washed that off and sat down. Again he thought he heard the wavering sound of an airplane. They were looking for him back at the river canyon. They wouldn't give up.

* * *

He had almost forgotten it was why he had been following the stream. He stood in full unshaded sunlight, open field and a hill before him. The spruce on either side ended in a sharp line, the flank of an army called to a halt. For a

moment he watched the high thin clouds move overhead. The air was still, rich with light and warmth. He could not believe his luck. He felt rescued, revived, found at last. He only needed to wait. This was a likely spot, beautiful, known on every map, Valley of Light. He stepped into it feeling blessed, his just reward.

He chose a knoll swathed in wild flowers, a bosom of earth. Hardly noticing his step he made his way for it, clumsily, grogged with gratitude. He gently let himself down on its slope, hands outstretched, his face nestling the lichen, its cardboard smell filling his nostrils. He closed his eyes but the sensation was too great, a swoon; and again a warning, a lesson he refused to forget . . . *not yet*. He rolled on his back to see why not, expecting the answer to float across the sky, one last burst to watch, the finale, Fourth of July; then his father would take him home. That was all he remembered of his father . . . one night lying on blankets under the insignificant stars watching flaming pinwheels, exploding rockets, like flowers, chrysanthemums, upsidedown tulips, silver phlox and Queen Anne's lace, incandescent, then dying, dropping, disappearing. 'Where does the light go?' 'It goes out,' the man said. Then later his mother said, 'Remember, you see, you remember, that was your father.'

He watched the stalks of fireweed quiver in a breeze he couldn't feel. When his eyelids began squeezing out the light, he sat up to make sure this was the place he wanted, that he hadn't been deceived. It was; it was perfect, a cradle of warmth, not a shadow in sight, a shelter of open air. He eyed the sun directly and measured its distance above the crest of the hill. Three hours, maybe more, he couldn't tell, wasn't sure where it would set. Did it matter? Was he going to scramble to the hilltop for the last weak rays? Hadn't he found what he wanted, the clearing, enough warmth for sleep, to wait? Where he lay could be seen from the air, much easier to spot if they wanted to find him. He was giving them that, a last bit of respect for their efforts — Elaine, John, Brad, whoever meant to save him — so they wouldn't take it wrong . . . that he had given up.

He pulled his legs under the poncho, tucking it carefully around him. He remembered the hood, which like a fool he had forgotten to use. Now he drew its strings tight, knotted them, a plastic caul with a hole for his nose and mouth. He uprooted tundra to provide a trough for his shoulder and a natural pillow for his head. If he made himself comfortable he might not be tempted to climb the hill when the sun was eclipsed once more. He laid his head down tentatively, rocking slightly in his fetal position, checking for leaks in the poncho, twigs or rocks that might knuckle against his side. Everything was fine, just the way he wanted it, snug as a bed he had slept in many times before.

Quotation and Sonnet

"I am a great inventor, you must know, and I manufacture my products in this lonely spot."

"What are your products?" enquired the Wizard.

"Well, I make Assorted Flutters for flags and bunting, and a superior grade of Rustles for ladies' silk gowns."

"I thought so," said the Wizard, with a sigh. "May we examine some of these articles?"

—from *Dorothy and the Wizard in Oz*
by L. Frank Baum; Chapter Ten,
"The Braided Man of Pyramid Mountain"

"You know," he said, "that sound consists of waves,
Where pitch is wavelength measured crest to crest;
If color equals wavelength, light behaves
The same. The ancient physicists professed
That 'ether' is to light as air to sound;
But tone is changed by motion in the air,
While recently experimenters found
That color is not altered anywhere
Such media would likely take effect."
He paused, and let me wonder how it is
That grave empiricists, a cautious sect,
Could take the seltzer but retain the fizz.
"Now: could our *thoughts* be amputated whole —
And thus substantiate the Human Soul?"

Backyard Blues

Thinking of places I remember
we used to go behind the house
banks of the creek bedded with angel's tears
laid down on curled ferns and grinning tiger's
mouths and the night before you
went away in the dark stumbling in the
dark fumbling in your pockets it crackled and snapped
and stretched taut I looked up and
trees opened along the crooked line
the creek made and you whispered
does it scratch and I said no your
shirt under me and the cool
quilt the weeds made you whispered does
it hurt I said yes I mean no
the trees were opening and the creek made
a jagged line against the sky.

Squab

The grey pigeon turned his head
and flickered from grey to green:
behind his eyes I saw red,
and his belly shone white between.
I turn my head too and change —
and dull as I am in light,
my feathers are sleek and strange
when I strut down the street at night.

Three Poems

James Applewhite

From as Far Away as Dying

And now in the end I can see this community together
Under angles of poor wooden gables and porches
Accumulated in vision and facing the west at evening,
Subsumed into an architectural face like Salisbury's entrance,
With figures fixed in humblest gesture, descending
A warped step, arising from porch swing or rocker,
Or stooping to spit tobacco, become parts of a cathedral design,
Immobilized in rays of one sun as if Arthurian king
Or stone-wimpled queen looking grandly from medieval Wells
From that choir-like height I remember become statues in the air.

Beside column, blistering paint: voices, this saint-like communion.

Beginning with Egypt

(The British Museum)

Manuscript and mummy, awl, gold, bowl and skull:
 A detritus of civilizations. Clay-breasted mother,
 Your face was a blade or a beak then, perfunctory pinch
 By his fingers, whose dream filled those thighs' cornucopia.
 Your Old Kingdom milky breasts were Isis. Long before
 Madonnas, you suckled Hōrus. Violent pot full
 Of tillage and births — between bestial Bes, a dwarf,
 And Min with erection as long as three thousand years —
 Your seed cram us still into stretch-belly time.

In a later niche, by crouching Aphrodite, I give thanks
 To the inventors of loveliness: there is clear-faced Demeter,
 These Auroræ with stone gauze of wind between the knees.
 An artist's folds envelop those thighs in their mystery,
 Whose sweet fat in stone erupts the shape of the Divine.

The Mary Tapes

Mary Lena Morrison was my name, before I married a Hill.
 This recorder was Roger's present. I got to make him happy.
 I pretend I'm telling it my life, for a time capsule.
 A thing they'll dig up in the twenty-first century. There'll just be
 This woman's voice, kinda telling 'em a time and a place.

Listening to myself, I sound right country, but a country way
 Of talking was the only one there was down home, seemed to me.
 I dress up my talking like a visiting preacher when I have to,
 But right now, I'm sounding like grandma, or Buddy, because
 Their way of saying things rises up from deep inside me
 When I tell how I feel, remembering our house and the farming.
 Lord, Lord, seems like a century ago, but those first days
 Don't leave you. I can remember just as well our little house.
 A tenant shack out behind of grandma's, that my folks fixed up.
 They'd used to be a lot better off, before the depression.
 Well it was five teeny rooms, just about flimsy as pasteboard.
 Sun made the roof tin creak like a stove cooling off.
 I hated to get up for the bus when it was hard down winter.
 Mud squished out by tire tracks would be frozen like cement
 Along the road, with little panes of ice hollowed over 'em,
 And wind through the cracks made that old piece of rug by my bed
 Feel frosted in stripes like a flag's. The hall was rickety,
 Pine boards that bounced you up and down when you walked.
 Near the kitchen stove, in a place where the linoleum was busted, I could see
 White flashings, when our chickens ran underneath the house.
 When I remember back then, and then think about now,
 With news on T.V., and shopping centers big enough for fields,
 And cars there in rows, flashing up sun with their windshields,
 It's kinda hard to realize who I am, with two worlds so opposite.

Roger is a professor over at N.C. State, and with his field
 Being the Civil War, he don't have to sound like a Yankee.
 But I swear before Jesus. Some of those colleagues of his.
 Their mouths move tight and uneasy, like their balls might be glass,
 And a noise could break 'em. The good-looking ones seem to like me

Though. I'm still right attractive. There's a teeny bit of gap
In between my front teeth. My face is sorta wide. The skin
By my eyes, where these blonds get drawn up in wrinkles, dieting,
When they're younger than me, is as slick right now as a baby's.
Roger likes to say I feel soft and wallowy to lay on,
But that's his compliment. When I first got pregnant with Jimmy,
I admit I looked as wide as the refrigerator door.
I had to be more careful with the others. Laura and Cindy
Are seven and nine. Jimmy came along when I was twenty,
Been married just a year and a half, both of us hot in love,
Living down home with grandma, and Roger in school
At E.C. I didn't have any more sense then than something wild.
Sometimes at night we'd walk down by granddaddy's fish pond
And screw by the oak tree, lightning bugs going against the stars.
I didn't believe I ever could die, or bad things ever could happen.
The way the fields felt and the air, like biting in an apple,
And swimming in a pond by tobacco, was all I ever wanted.
If heat currents were wavering and snakey, I loved them too.
Having Jimmy scared me a little. But it was the sadness later
That changed my feelings, made me get suspicious about the doves,
When their cooings started sounding like dyings and lonesomeness they
promised.

Jimmy was still a baby in his crib. I'd walked up the road,
To see if there was mail. When I came back in, he was dead.
Right blue and still. The covers were not over his face or anything.
The doctor came, and had all he could do to take care of me.
It like to have killed me. I cried for a week like I was crazy.
I just kept my hands kinda messed up in tears and in my hair,
Not seeing people's faces. I thought it was something wrong I'd done.
Those kind of crib deaths happen, I found out later.
I took it on my own self then. The one thing that saved
Our marriage, was that Roger never said even the least little word
To blame me. He knew I'd have died. I wouldn't eat meals.
The doves and bob whites worried me. I couldn't stand snakes
Run over on the pavement, or frogs squished flat to little skins.
I couldn't stand storms, and the way wind piled up in clouds
And swooshed down with rain on your house in a river.
And bolts of lightning. Forky and crooked as Satan's stabber.
It seemed like everything I'd heard about in church
That was dirty and evil, was coming up out of those ditches,
When rain was making veils on the fields. And I was the one
Letting it all happen. Had let Roger get in between my legs
When we were still in high school, parked on the ox road at night
Where honeysuckle smell from the viney woods was tangled up

With the way we were breathing, and made us have to pant.
And that was why Jimmy had died, I sometimes imagined.
So we sold our little piece of the farm, and moved up here,
And Roger went to school at State, and finished at Chapel Hill.

I hadn't meant to get into that. It saddens me still.
I was so lonesome in the country after Jimmy had died, that a hound,
Or a mourning dove cooing way off, could make me feel vanished,
Like my own self's ghost. I thought I'd feel better in town,
Where some train whistle owl-whooping from a swamp cut six miles away
Couldn't hollow out the marrow in my bones. But the lonesomeness in
towns

Is different, like a door slammed shut so you can't breathe easy.
Now Roger and me have decided we like the country after all.
The land up here's not scary. It's got rolling hills, so the sky
Doesn't crowd in so close at the horizon. Some radio tower
Or T.V. antenna is always poking up there in the distance,
So the trees don't look too powerful, and you can love 'em better.
I especially like falls, with daisies and chicory by the road,
And sweet gums turning their different colors in October.
I been collecting all these magazines, like *Better Homes and Gardens*,
For years. There're thousands of house plans to look at, and dream for.
Sometimes the rafters of exactly the right house for us all
Will shine there inside my head like they're made out of sunbeams,
Kinda raised up, perfect and golden, higher than the trees.
We've got us a lot, in a woodsy new section they're developing,
With trees all over it, and a stream that runs along the back,
And splashes over rocks, making pools that're clear to the bottom,
With minnows in 'em fanning tame as goldfish, and leaves
Crinkled up on the surface, moving when the wind blows, like they're
Not hardly touching the water. Our house'll look over the stream,
And Roger'll have a study, with a book about wild flowers there.
Our back windows will reflect full of gold when the sun goes down,
Like the bright glass cases for our books. With the walls' shapes
Shimmering in trees, it seems like a magic cage, like understanding
Everything's name, so the house we build around us will be happy
With the best part of marriage, the way windows and mirrors hold furniture
In beautiful rooms. It'll hold understanding all around us.
Past the west ridge there's a river, but sun on our windows
Will keep away old-timey things. Even if buggies and leather
And horses and a brown like rust from Civil War cannons
Gets to swimming with the river, it won't muddy into our rooms.

Well. It may be just a dream. But I do know, remembering,
It all seems not to hurt quite the same, from later on.
I want our house to be like that, like the understanding that comes
After awhile, and will make up for those first little rooms.
Even telling things into this recorder makes 'em easier inside me.
The more I think, it was not understanding that hurt me, seems like.
We had good times working in tobacco, me just a girl,
My bosoms little budd'en-up things as hard as green apples.
But laughing with the others, a lot of the time I'd be uneasy.
Nank, the black woman who helped us, was mean as a mink,
Could slap at you dangerous as a rattlesnake striking.
She'd hold a razor blade between two fingers. You'd be cut 'fore
You'd seen it. Her indian cheekbones made her eyes look squinty.
Field niggers would lean in their faces at the pack house door
Where she'd be sitting at the grading table with leaves scattered on it,
And it gave me goosebumps, she looked so dangerous and womanly.
I could see how the hands were feeling, in that tobacco richness,
With the 'dust brass-colored and like you could smell it with your skin,
It was August and all of that sun and dust and work stored up
And now was near 'bout time it was going to be sold.
The hand had had a drink, and would want 'ol Nank real bad
With her back narrowed down like a wasp's to where her hips
Blossomed out, and her tits in the work shirt showing deep between 'em.
The hand's face shiney with wanting with the tractor dust on it
Reminded me of a new inner tube, when they're powdery with white,
But he was afraid to be sassy with Nank, he knew he'd be cut
As quick as if a cold wind had carried a razor.
And her eyes would be black like buttons while she watched him,
And after he'd gone, there'd be a sick-feeling wondering in my belly.
She'd grab me by my ribs and tickle me and hurt my bosoms
And ask me how many boys had ever done it to me,
And it made me feel flushed and like hot water inside, even
When I didn't understand. I guess it was not knowing about things
Like loving and dying and Jesus and when somebody got saved
That made me feel lonesome. It seemed like grown-ups kept secrets
About that kind of sickening fun that could cramp you like colic,
Like when a woman in a revival would get crazy with Jesus
And her lips turn back like grinning and hurting at one time.
I imagined to myself that that's the way it'd be if you were loving,
Or if a baby was coming. Nank had made me leery 'bout men-folks,
And sometimes my mamma kinda reminded me of Nank, her blond hair
Kinked up in curls, and eyes a clear blue that looked through you,
That could burn you as pretty as those colored windows in a church.
Righteousness can lay on you like acid if you've been a sinner,

And daddy could seem no-count when I looked through her eyes.
She wasn't really mean, but she always expected so much.

Still, when I try to think who I really am, I see a circle
Of water in a mason jar. I'm carrying it to daddy,
Where he's plowing the tobacco, and the dirt is so powdery
Fine and burning hot, it's like wood ashes just from the stove.
Sky up there is clouded over thin and white-hot,
And when one of those solemn-sounding mourning doves coos,
It seems I'm a thousand miles from anywhere, like nobody
I know knows who I am, or could call my name. The mule
And daddy behind look so small and so lost, against trees
By the river where it's sneaking away from sun inside its smell,
That just for a minute the whole field looks old-timey
Like in those yellowy tin pictures, and I'm seeing for a woman
Who wore long crinoline slips and dresses like curtains.
And sadness from dark horses, that reared up and threw girl riders,
Or carried off their sweethearts to battle, is running with the river.

I'm trying to understand how the lonesomeness comes on me, I reckon,
Makes tears break out like sweat on the inside of my body.
I wonder where the spirit of you comes from. Wherever it is,
Far as the ocean, maybe that's where lonesomeness is for.
Being in love is the one way I don't have to feel it.
The few times I've wanted to love some man besides Roger,
It was from missing that feeling, that first love inside you
In shoots like spring rye, so green it's kinda painful.

But I ain't gone go be unfaithful. Not starting now.
I know how it feels, when Roger's had chasing inclinations.
Tail chasing, we call it, for a man. Then it's kinda funny.
If it's a woman, she's a whore. People are ignorant and mean
About a woman's feelings. I remember my daddy at White Lake.
He'd be standing on the amusement pier with a beer in his fist,
And looking at the girls in shorts, like his eyes were his hands,
Rubbing over their tits and their crotches. He'd say to mamma,
"Just because you've ordered, don't mean you can't look at the menu."
She got him back, but not in any way he understood.
She'd get me against him, and kinda shut him out of our lives.
She bossed him about our money, kept it added up herself.
Men were overgrown boys, was the way she acted.
They'd have these arguments. Daddy'd get jealous, when mamma
Hadn'd done a damn thing except get cold against him,
Without even knowing she was spiteful. And drinking was part of it.

At night it would seem like a wind was shivering the house,
The way they were arguing. I'd be turning hot and cold in my bed
From their voices back and forth, and finally a slap would sound out
And a screaming crying, and then, a lot later, the noise they made screwing.
I know I've got loving and hating all mixed up inside me,
But I hope to God I understand it better with Roger
Than they did. One thing here near Raleigh, with radio antennas
In the distance, and planes taking off for New York and all,
You don't feel so ignorant and doomed. If Cindy gets sick,
There're doctors, and I don't have to feel that summertime dreading,
When it seems like the folks chopping fields, or hitting at each other,
Or reaching down tobacco, or grabbing for a tit in a work shirt,
Are shimmering in a slow motion movie like walking in their sleep
Or like divers underwater, and drunk as they look with heat
In August, you expect for their hair to float up. And the only words
Explaining things are rumbling in a revival, when heat lightning
Is sheeting and flickering and the preacher's "damnations" and "hell"
Are muttering with about as much sense as the bullfrogs and thunder.

So when Roger got a mind to chase tail about two years ago,
I didn't let it feel like the end of the world. Like I would have
Down home. I made myself remember how funny it was,
A man near 'bout forty getting silly over this narrow-assed student.
Sorta bright and spindly, so he could believe he was interested in her mind.
I could just imagine it, if I'd turned Roger loose. She'd have had
A mule between her shafts, that she won't ready to plow.
I remember my daddy's joke, about a hound named Ned.
Old Ned was outside this school house humping on a bitch.
A right young new teacher didn't know what in sam hill to do,
Till a boy named Johnny stuck a finger in his ass.
Ned's ass, that is. He ran off faster'n tarnation.
I know'd him, said Johnny. That's old Ned.
He can dish it out, but he just can't take it.
My daddy used to laugh over that, 'cause he knew it was true.
The sorriness in a man is like that sneaking hound.
Hit 'em with a dose of their own and it makes 'em sick.
So I decided to give Roger back a little of his own.
We'd met this young doctor and his wife at a party, and I saw
He was that prissy, pretty-faced kind, who marries him a woman
Who's not even good-looking as he'd be, with a wig and some powder.
She'd be slim pickens for Roger, once his student ran off.
So anyway I made up this complaint, with shooting pains,
And palpitations, and dizziness when I got up from a chair.
And started the appointments with this doctor. I'd make 'em afternoons,

And take my time afterwards, maybe drive around and drink a beer.
One time I went to a movie and got home after nine.
Roger looked white around his lips, like if the kids get sick.
I acted real casual, asked if he'd had any supper
And if the children were hungry. He said he'd taken 'em to Hardee's,
When I didn't come back. I said the appointment had run late.
His eyes were the darkest I'd ever seen 'em, like a stallion's.
He asked me to tell him 'fore God if that doctor was crooked,
If he was "abusing my trust." I said I was a woman over thirty,
And if a good-looking man wanted me, and I wanted him,
He'd just as well not talk about no 'busing of a trust,
And who the hell did he think I was, Snow White,
Or Little Red Riding Hood, and that he won't my daddy yet,
And if he wanted to spend his time with some cherry-assed student,
He hadn't no business to be talking like that doctor had some
Sacred trust. First I thought he was gett'en ready to faint,
Then I thought he was gett'en set to choke me. He took hold
Of my sides with his hands, and lifted me a foot off the floor,
Without even knowing what he was doing. He said I'd better tell him
Exactly what I meant, 'cause it was 'bout to be too late.
I said I'd tell him everything, if he'd do the same.
So anyways he admitted to his fooling with that student,
And I cussed him, and laughed in his face, and said how silly
He looked, when I'd fooled him with that doctor. He grabbed
Me right rough and shook me so the hair fell in my face
And my hand had got loose and slapped him before I knew I'd done it.
His hands were on my throat about to choke me when I looked
In his eyes, and asked if he loved me, because folks down home
Used to kill the ones they loved. His face changed quick,
Like a cloud had left the sun. We sat down together, trembling,
And talked it out half of the night, and afterwards made love.

I hadn't meant to dig up all these family skeletons.
It seems like, talking to this recorder, one thing gets tied
To another, like those scarves in a magician's pocket.
I guess I took after my folks enough to have a love-fight
With Roger. I wanted to get away from all that, but I can't blame
My folks too much, remembering how it was down home.
My daddy worked up to an electrician from following a mule.
It wasn't any easy life. He got started with wiring work
During World War Two, on a hanger for blimps in Elizabeth City.
Later he was a lineman, climbed poles in the middle of the country.
He'd got up to superintendent of the town's lights and water
By the time I started first grade. You think we won't proud,

Driving through the main street at night in our shiny Buick,
When it was daddy who fixed up the current, and store windows
And cars looked kinda famous with lights, brighter than Hollywood
Or New York or anywhere. I'd stuck to daddy like a burr
'Fore I get to realizing how different girls are. I wonder
How I first got to doubting him. It was mamma, I guess.
She said girls had to watch out for boys, they had a snakey thing
Where ours was just a crack. They could get theirs up inside of you.
She said a man's business was as ugly as the skin on a bat's wing.
Now I don't think they're ugly, but they're funny sometimes.
They rear up heroic, full of blood, like a horse on hind legs,
Then later are shriveled up soft and white, like a little piece of putty.
So it makes me mad when men walk swaggery, like they were waving
And wobbling it around right then, like it was a magic power
They could work by themselves. A man's just half of the loving.
A hard dick right by itself is lonesome and hurtful.
When men get hard into their work and bulge big muscles,
With leather belts full of linemen's tools strapped on,
And big spiked boots, they act like they're killing some enemy.
If a woman comes by, they'll whistle and yell out like savages.
Men don't seem to understand. They want to do something sneaky
And then get away. *Fuck* is the ugliest word.
That bat's skin my mamma told about is in people's heads.
But it's what we grew up with, that red-neck way of not respecting
A woman or a kid or a nigger or just some little animal
Or even the trees and the water, because life's been too hard
And men have had to work in the sun till they hate anything
That's weaker than they are. My daddy took me hunting one time.
He shot one quail, then his dog started flushing 'em too soon,
And he got madder'n hades. When a rabbit jumped up, he shot,
Just with his bird load, and didn't even care if he'd hit it.
I found it crouched down in some briars. I yelled, "Daddy,
You hurt it, but it's still not dead." "It's hurt bad enough,"
He hollered back. I picked up a rock and smashed its head.
Then couldn't make myself quit crying. I had a problem with that,
When I was little. I'd get almost quit, then my breath
Would kinda hiccup, and the sobbing would start all over.

What probably brought this up was the luck we had with our lot.
The power company did it. We went out there on a Sunday
And they'd cut this lightpole right of way slam along the creek.
These dark tarry poles were lying around rusty-looking as cannons.
The trees were chain-sawed down like it was people were lying there.
I thought about Roger's old Civil War battlefields, and his pictures,

With men dropped next to fences with their shirts blown open.
And the streams and the rocks looked kinda shamed and exposed,
Like some young girl that the linemen might've pulled the clothes
Off of, near the border of bushes they'd left not cut,
That looked kinda lacy, like the hem of a dress that's been torn
In all different times, but keeps on growing back and living.
Those blind-looking lightpoles there made my breath kinda catch.
Roger really loves me, I guess. His face got real tender
When I kept on sitting on that pine log with catches hiccuping
In my breathing, as if the little girl who'd killed that rabbit,
And who'd heard daddy's linemen "mother fucking" each other,
And their joking sneakiness like greasy mechanics, as if their hands
Would leave smeared patches like bruises wherever they touched you,
Was still inside. He put his arms around me from behind, said how
Sorry he was, and that we'd damn well do something if we could.
I was talking kinda crazy, 'bout how men would fight battles,
And tear up corn fields, and burn down the houses and trees,
And come home one-armed and heroic from whichever war
And let women do the worrying. So Roger said it was war
For the most of folks, but we had us a peace, and he loved me
And honored me without that old destruction. So we came on home,
And when Roger got that real estate man on the phone, he told him
How the lot had been ruined, and that now we didn't want it.
Well, to make a long story short, that fat-assed salesman
Got his mess out to the development Monday morning
And stopped 'em from cutting at the edge of the last lot.
We traded for it, and we're going to have sort of an outpost.
In indian days they had forts against the wilderness,
But nowadays the savages are the dunces in pickup trucks
Who sneak up on the woods with chain saws. Roger and me know
That that kind of red-neck power by itself is as bad as a war,
'Cause the man has got to act with the woman in an understanding way
And a house needs to fit in with trees like it grew by itself
And the woods we've got left need pruning and gardening, not cutting.
I'm going to keep dreaming my house in those leaves, with rafters
Clear wood, like the sun had turned into amber inside of a tree-trunk,
And so you can feel from inside it the branches and the weather
And what's growing on around it, like in our first little rooms.

I'm going to keep on dreaming it there till it all comes true.

Under the Bosom Tree

The dress was a little tight but she wanted to take it anyway. She said she didn't have her garment on. When she got home and put her garment on she'd be a good two sizes smaller, she said. Lou had never heard this use of the word "garment" before and he looked at his mother blankly for a moment, picturing something long and cloak-like. "Foundation garment, dear," she said. She told the salesclerk, "We'll pay cash."

"We do carry this item in a larger size," said the salesclerk.

"Oh, at home I have this garment that's a perfect miracle. You never saw anything like it."

Lou wondered why she hadn't worn the garment to the store, then. He slumped against a counter-full of blouses — a lean, stooped, high-waisted man in a rumpled overcoat and very large desert boots. One dry plume of hair fell over his forehead.

"Anyway, after tonight I'm going on a diet," his mother told him.

They were shopping for an outfit for her sixty-seventh birthday, which would be celebrated that evening. Lou had taken an afternoon off from his students to do this. He couldn't ask his wife, because she had the carpool Tuesdays. And his brothers and sisters lived in other states, and his father had died four months ago. It was all up to him. He would have to take her dress-shopping, and shoe-shopping, and then back to her gaunt-faced Baltimore rowhouse all the way downtown. And even then he wouldn't be finished but must stay and drink at least two cups of coffee, and maybe look at her photo albums again or listen to a letter from some tedious distant relative. Of course he loved her, but he felt the weight of her sagging on his shoulders, aching at the back of his neck. He felt burdened by the sight of her dull gray hair with its netted, wispy look, and by her lozenge-shaped earrings paved with lustreless diamonds dragging at her long thick earlobes. But then, catching himself in a sigh, he wondered if she knew how he felt and had therefore chosen the first dress she saw in order not to take up his time. It certainly didn't look right to him — polka-dotted, too pale and sheer for November, too ruffled for her short, plump figure. He thought of asking if she'd like to look further, but she might see that as a criticism. Let it be. He passed the salesclerk a handful of bills.

"Now shoes," he told his mother.

"Oh, Lou, you don't have to go to all this trouble for me."

On the escalator, she plucked continually at the front of her coat. Escalators

made her nervous. So did elevators; so did nearly everything. She didn't even know how to drive a car. It amazed him that she'd managed to raise five children. "Help me off, Lou," she said when they came to the second floor, and he reached forward for her wrist and felt how tense her muscles were beneath the spongy skin.

In the shoe department, they found nothing pale enough to match the pale blue polka dots. "It's November," the clerk told them. He seemed offended. "We don't carry pastels in November."

"Medium blue, then?" Lou's mother asked.

Her eyes filled with tears; her mouth grew large and soft.

"Or navy," Lou said quickly. "Navy might go well."

The clerk found a navy pump that Lou's mother liked very much — wineglass heels, a grosgrain bow at the toe. Lou could tell she wasn't just pretending. Her chin lifted; she took on a perky look. While the clerk was measuring her foot, she patted Lou's hand and said, "You're right, a medium blue might have clashed. You have to be so careful, matching blues." The clerk went off to the stockroom. Lou's mother sank back in her seat, humming under her breath. "There's something very soothing about other people putting shoes on you," she said. "Have you noticed?"

He hadn't.

"When I was a girl, I'd go to shoestores just for comfort when something bad had happened. When no one had asked me to a dance, or Mama was mad at me. I had an awful girlhood; I was so unhappy." She giggled, for no reason he could see. She covered her nose with one hand — a fan of pearly pink nails, wrinkled fingers. "I'd go with my friend Olympia. Isn't that a name? Olympia. Poor girl, she was five foot eleven in her stocking feet. Common sense should have told us not to be seen together: we were Mutt and Jeff, just Mutt and Jeff. We spent every minute figuring how to get grown up as soon as possible. I'd meet her halfway between our two houses, under this tree we called the bosom tree; it had bulges or growths of some kind on its trunk. And we'd wonder and dream, plan for when our real lives would begin. Now it seems to me that what we said was like a spell: I called for a husband, children, a house full of Early American furniture, and look! they all came. Who'd have guessed it? I'd have been scared to open my mouth, if I'd known."

She pondered a row of high-heeled boots. "And then," she said, "if we felt discouraged, why, we'd go on down to North Avenue and wear out a dozen shoe-clerks — me with my size four, her with her ten triple-A. Just soothed and mesmerized by those cool, new-smelling shoes slipping on our feet."

The clerk returned with a tan shoebox. He knelt and opened it and took out the navy pump. "Oh, look, they have it in my size," said Lou's mother. She slid her foot in and then gave a dreamy smile, as if demonstrating her long-ago girlhood for Lou. "It's lovely, don't you think?" she asked.

Lou and the clerk both nodded, in slow motion, drawn into her soft, gentle trance.

* * *

"Here I am on the Valery sisters' lawn, the summer before I met your father. Goodness, look at those clothes! I never liked the Valery sisters, but they seemed to go with the summertime. Their lawn, and their hammock, and their little brother chasing croquet balls . . . I was just pulled on over there ever summer afternoon. Winters, I hardly saw them.

"Here I am at my engagement party. Skirts are going up, you notice. How do you like my hat? Your father helped me pick it out; he was quite the dresser then. He told me everything: what to read, what to wear . . . I was only seventeen. Eighteen when I married. I'd never spent a night away from home before I married, did you know that? And there I went, rushing off to Niagara Falls — oh, everyone told me to wait a while. 'What's your hurry, Dolly?' they said. I was in a terrible hurry. Then look at what happened: twelve long years before I had my first baby. Oh, I tell you, we near about despaired. My folks had just given up asking. Everybody felt sorry for us.

"But see? Here you are in the English pram your father ordered from London. Weren't your cheeks round! It was your Grandmother Tilghman made you wear that lace cap; she said it kept your ears from sticking out. And look at me, proud as pie. I don't *look* thirty, do I? Well, those awful clothes put you off, I know. Those shiny, shiny stockings. But take my word, I was a very young thirty.

"Here's your sister Nell when she was just a baby. Here's Paula beside the RCA Victor phonograph. Goodness, it looks like we were awfully proud of that old phonograph, doesn't it? But the fact is, we just couldn't get Paula away from it long enough to snap her picture. She loved music so. She loved those African folk songs that were going around, remember them? Always playing that one about Kitty —

Out in the wide world, Kitty, pretty Kitty,
Out in the wide world, Kitty,
Far across the sea...

We had to put fingernail polish on the label of that so she'd know which side to play. Of course, she couldn't read yet. Always coming to me: 'Which side, Mommy, which side? Where will I find my song?'"

She let the album fall shut and rose and went to the bookcase. Lou set down his coffeecup and cleared his throat. "Now wait a minute," she told him, "I want to show you something funny." She returned with the next album — red cardboard, leather-grained. When she sat down, a sugary smell like marshmallows puffed up around her. "I was looking through this the other evening and it gave me such a laugh," she said. "Oh, those Fifties! The clothes we wore! And you children in your baggy sweaters, bobbysox ... look at Nell's hairdo. Look at her make-up! All mouth and no eyes, isn't she funny?"

She gave her little shattered laugh, and Lou smiled and shook his head a few times and glanced at his watch. It was a quarter till six.

"When you compare," she said, "I mean, compare those way-back photos with these, doesn't it give you a shock? First everything is so still and peaceful, so posed, so ... *muted*. Even the paper isn't that glarey kind, just soft and dull. Then . . . why, you know, Lou, I blame it on rock-and-roll."

"On what?" he said.

"There we were, just drifting along, and one day we turned on the radio and someone shouted out

One, two, three o'clock, four o'clock, ROCK!

Five, six, seven o'clock, eight o'clock . . ."

Lou stared at her. She was a little thin of voice, but she didn't do such a bad job of it. "Well," he said, "what's that got to do with —"

"Oh, and then life speeded up so! Got so noisy! You children went off to high school and brought your friends home and learned to drive . . ."

"But we'd have done that even without the rock-and-roll," he said.

"Oh, I know that. I'm just saying the way it seems, don't you understand? I'd go to the foot of the stairs to call you all for breakfast, and one by one you'd wake up and turn on your radios. First I'd hear the music from your room and then from Paula's, and then from Nell's and then the twins', all different songs growing louder and more jumbled — like those French movies, you know the kind with accordion music? Where the music gets faster and faster and the people get faster too, till they're nothing but a blur of color? That's what I mean. Life speeded up so."

And she turned another page, and smoothed another photo, and gave it that special, sad, one-sided smile that always made Lou feel so helpless.

His daughters had been forced to wear skirts, which they hated. In fact, they'd all three been in jeans for so long that their knees seemed indecent now — bony and white, almost glowing. His wife was in her prettiest soft wool suit. He thought that was nice of her. It was only a family party, after all: coffee and cake in his mother's overstuffed parlor. His mother, of course, wore the polka-dotted dress (still too tight) and navy pumps. She had to keep telling how Lou had found the pumps. "Out of nowhere, out of all those clumsy, cloddish things the young people seem to prefer nowadays — 'Why not navy?' he said, and there they were. Don't you love them?"

Lou's wife started lighting the thirteen candles on the birthday cake. "Six and seven: sixty-seven," Lou's mother said. "I thought of that this morning. I hope it's not unlucky."

She laughed and smoothed her skirt. Then she grew serious. Lou saw a pucker appear between her eyebrows — shallow and fleeting, like wrinkles on the skin of simmering milk. "This will be my very first birthday without your father," she told him. "Who would have guessed, last year at this

time?"

Lou mumbled something and pressed his palms together between his knees.

"Though *he* guessed, maybe," she said. "Yes, I believe he might have. After that last stroke, Lou, he kept a diary hour by hour. I didn't tell you that, did I? He used an old appointment book. When every hour was up he'd make his entry in the space for appointments. 'Watched ballgame, Orioles won,' he'd say. Or, 'Bit of stomach trouble.' At the time I thought it was boredom, but yes, I suppose he suspected something. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Your candles are melting," Lou told her.

He went on pressing his palms together, while his mother surveyed him over the cake. Thirteen little paintbrush-tips of light gave her a filmy, exalted look.

Then she took a breath and squinched up her eyes and blew. All the candles went out at once. Lou's daughters — blank-faced, fidgety, yawning — brightened and cheered, in a startled sort of way. "See, you didn't think I could do it, did you," his mother told them. "Thought I was too old and feeble. Oh, there's life in me yet! Every Monday and Thursday I carry my own trashcans out. Every Saturday I walk by myself to the grocery store with my little folding cart."

She reached for the cake knife and started cutting slices much too large, bearing them shakily to the plates that Peg held out. "I've had to learn to fend for myself," she told Peg. "But it didn't take me long. The first few mornings after Jim died, I woke feeling just — oh, *elated*. I thought, 'Look at me, I made it through the night on my own.' I was so proud of that."

Then she looked down at the cake knife, and carefully flicked a crumb from the handle. "The only trouble was," she said, "there was no one to show. I wanted Jim to notice how well I'd managed, don't you see. But I couldn't have both things at once."

Peg leaned over and hugged her, looking meanwhile at Lou. But Lou stared off at a knick-knack shelf. He felt guilty and defeated. He had a moment of seriously wishing that his mother would just hurry up and die. But then he imagined her returning even from heaven, somehow, to talk on and on about her experiences there in her wistful, tinkling, girlish way; and he saw that he was never going to be free of her. He groaned, kneaded his hands. He accepted a slice of foamy white cake and a heavy silver fork. "It's angel," his mother told him. "Your favorite. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, Mother," he said.

His wife passed plates to the girls, who had returned to rolling-eyed boredom on their various ruffled chairs. "Seconds when you're through!" Lou's mother told them. They straightened up and grew docile, but the only real sign of life came from Winnie — the eleven-year-old, the difficult one.

"How come Betsy gets the piece with the sugar rose?" she asked her mother.

"Winnie Tilghman!"

"Just because I'm the oldest, I always get the plain things. One sugar rose on the cake and Betsy's the one you give it to."

"I didn't get one. I'm not complaining," Laurie said.

"My fault, I should have put on three," Lou's mother told them gaily. "Next time I'll know better."

"Betsy's already fat as a hog," said Winnie.

"Winnie, that will *do*," Peg said.

Lou's mother stirred her coffee, keeping her eyes lowered. Her face, Lou felt, was deliberately tranquil; she drew attention to her lack of comment. Anger made his mouth go dry. "Look here, young lady," he said to Winnie, "if that's your attitude you can just go wait in the car."

"Ah, no . . ." said his mother, raising one gracious hand.

But Winnie said, "All right, I will! Who wants to sit here anyway?"

And out she flounced, leaving her cake on a footstool, swirling her pleated skirt. The door slammed behind her. Peg sighed.

"I'm sorry," she told Lou's mother. "It's her age. I hope."

"Oh yes, her age," Lou's mother said. "Don't apologize."

"Dr. Martin says just to think of it as two solid years of premenstrual blues."

Lou wished she wouldn't talk that way in front of his mother, but his mother perked up and looked interested. "Really?" she said. "Why, of course. How fascinating." She lowered her coffeecup and gazed after Winnie. "My, how quickly they grow up," she said. "Isn't it funny? Everything happens at the appointed time, all the changes take place as they're supposed to. You know, I've always imagined I knew exactly how those people out in Houston feel."

"Houston?" said Peg.

"Isn't that where they have those NASA headquarters? Where they keep track of how their rockets are doing way out in space? All those events set in motion all that time ago, and then each stage proceeding on its own while the scientists sit back and watch. It must come as some surprise, though, even to them, sometimes. Wouldn't you suppose?"

Then she finished her coffee, and set the cup back in its saucer with a delicate little clink. She looked around at her family. Her eyes were very bright, her cheeks were soft and curving. "I thank you," she said, "for a very fine birthday," and she gave everybody present a truly beautiful smile.

Wallace Kaufman

Research Ship

(For Orrin Pilkey)

The sonar's wire pen
draws ocean floor —
fine black line
stored on a drum graph
says
500 fathoms above the Blake Plateau.

Looking for manganese.

Brown wedge of light
circles the radar screen
no one in sight.

Each 15 minutes I
record time and depth
I
done making notes at 4 a.m.
turn on my own radar —
begins to circle in my head
looking east
returns the stormy blip
Vietnam
looking west, very small
woman child house

my position
no good to a man
at sea in a dark room.

I fall overboard
sink into time
to the torpedo room
of my radio years;
Buster Brown Shoes is bringing
to kids like me everywhere
"Land of the Lost"

only now
 Froggy the Gremlin's dead
 of nitrogen narcosis —
 no kindly umbrellas
 no shy china cups
 no lonesome harmonicas.
 What's lost is finally lost
 or I'm blind.

Looking for black phosphates.

I walk the top deck aft. Stern plunges into dark swells.
 Below in holy spotlight four men with limp white sample
 bags wait for the box dredge — bucket the size of
 a desk drawer.

Looking for round oolites.

A winch screams as it draws a mile of steel cable, taut
 wire spraying water.
 To this same stern we retrieve day and night, day and night
 sand or mud.
 "The purpose of this cruise is to locate ancient reefs
 and beaches. We will criss-cross the Blake Plateau
 looking for manganese nodules and other minerals
 of importance to man."
 Oh grant us this day for chief scientists, crew and ship
 \$150,000
 plus 25% overhead
 and we will be looking.

Full fathom five thy father lies . . .
 my father in an Oldsmobile Rocket 88
 wrapped in power lines
 breathed flame, is ash.
 Shakespear, this is the tempest
 this empty sea and memory adrift

looking for gold sands.

Down there everything is
 "Dredge, dredge"
 he shouts above the winch
 and beyond the holy light

in the crypt of a swell
up toward their stretched arms

All truth is dark

rises the pin of light
the ball of blue light
the streaming of phosphorous stars
in the instant of a pulse
it splashes free as a fish

and dies on surfacing

light of risen life spilling
hands pillage the icy dredge
the dumb sacks are tagged.
This is the muck that was our life.
It clings to the dredge until hosed
broken light washing out the scuppers
to mark our position.

Back to my watch in time:

write fathoms

write 4:15 a.m.

write note for bottle

Man in love, looking for life, hopelessly at sea.

Song For My Daughters

Courage is small and the longing great
and the river rushes through to its gate
and reaches the Rhine in rocking motion.
Your voices float over the open ocean.

A poem for all the rivers crossed,
a poem for all the castles lost,
a song for the Loreley that brings
ancient tears for immortal things.

New wine the green grape cluster fills;
the sun bursts over the terraced hills
and suddenly lights up for me
that sacred plaything: poetry.

If You Read This...

The suicided poet rose from the river,
weeded,
le bien-connu de la Seine, and spoke:

Through the murk, the years,
the darkness, the night,
true to the image,
changing, she changed.
Dark small imago:
maternal-grandmaternal
she often threw her opposite upon the screen:
copper-bright negative afterimage.

Sometimes blond, blue-eyed, Norse,
she cradled me in her arms
and stroked my hair,
wore many masks.
Then she appeared as a warrior
with phallic lance
cruelly giving the Amfortas wound.

Caressing the ferns of her fen
brought juice to the tongue.
Or, in a dream,
darting my tongue like a snake
into the knothole.
Two negroes melted like wax,
their bones caught fire;
crushed together, burst
into flame. Cried out:
"The soul has not in flesh its house
but houses elsewhere
in her own home."

If you read this
you will know
that it was you.

Two Joys

The adolescent's soft increasing stroke
 begins tumescence: lengthens, lifts, throbs,
 crescendoes (indurate) to gush in gobs
 whenas the bright skyrocket rose and broke.
 He dreams (what does he not dream?) 'cello note,
 the pear-shaped juice of peach runs on his gums
 until the swan into the goddess comes,
 comes seven times, breath catching in his throat.

He well deserves (does he?) a resting nest
 soft as wet pine-straw, warm as the swan's down.
 Incubus turns to succubus, come down —
 but little dreams the best: being a guest,
 the dolphin undulating to the crest,
 the stab of rebirth and the boat at rest.

An Interview with William Styron

William Styron graduated from Duke in 1947. Four years later he published his first novel, Lie Down in Darkness, which was a bestseller and was awarded the Prix de Rome of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. It was followed by The Long March (1952), Set This House on Fire (1960), and The Confessions of Nat Turner, which won the 1968 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction.

This interview was taped in Mr. Styron's home in Roxbury, Connecticut, by Mike Stanford, editor of The Archive.

THE ARCHIVE: You've given William Blackburn of Duke credit for getting you started as a writer. The fascinating thing to me about Professor Blackburn is that he was not himself a writer, had apparently no personal literary ambitions, yet as a teacher he managed to produce, or at least inspire, several writers of real significance. What was his method?

WILLIAM STYRON: Well, I've pondered that a lot myself. I don't think he *had* a method. He was just one of these rather awe-inspiringly sympathetic people who felt deeply, had a terrific sense of the agony and poetry of life and communicated it to his students; and if he felt you had talent he leaped on you like a burglar. It was amazing, his passion for teaching and his passion to extract the best that he could from someone he thought had gifts. I think he might have been a frustrated writer, so frustrated that he almost never wrote a word, and this was one of his big handicaps as a scholar in the sense that he wasn't one of these scholars who proliferated huge amounts of books and articles. I think he had some kind of a struggle there. And I think maybe people like myself, Reynolds, others, were his substitute — he lived through us. At least that's my tentative explanation for his excellence as a teacher. I learned however as much from his courses in Elizabethan poetry, for instance, as I did from his writing courses. It must be remembered that he was basically a scholar of seventeenth-century prose and poetry, and to be quite honest, as wonderful as he was as a teacher of creative writing I don't think he was all that up on modern writing. I mean, he certainly understood what made a young writer of promise, but had he not had that remarkable ability to get over the essence of Elizabethan and seventeenth-century literature he would have lacked a huge dimension for me as a teacher. So it was a combination of these things. He was an exceptional man, there's no doubt about it.

ARCHIVE: He taught very little, then, in terms of craft or technique?

STYRON: Almost nothing. As I recollect he did use the famous Brooks and Warren text *Understanding Fiction*, which was then very much taught in colleges. But in general he shied away from that. He spoke very little about narrative points of view, etc. It was rather an instinctual thing he had. He just knew when you had something and he encouraged it, and he left it up to you as a beginning writer to find your way. I think he did say some wise things about reading, always insisting that a writer could not be a good writer unless he read a lot. I remember because he knew Conrad so well he turned me on to Conrad, which I always appreciated. The fact that he insisted on our reading widely, along with my own impulse toward reading, was a very important factor in my becoming a writer.

ARCHIVE: *Lie Down in Darkness*, which was published when you were twenty-six, was unusually successful, in every sense, for a first novel. How do you think such early success affected your development?

STYRON: I don't think it hurt me any, contrary to the clichés about how early success destroys talent. It was a success of a very limited sort in a curious way. I'm not denigrating the success itself because the book got quite good reviews and it was a bestseller, which of course is an exceptional thing for a first novel. But there were two other still-famous first novels on the bestseller list at the same time — *The Catcher in the Rye* and *From Here to Eternity* — and both of these were vastly more successful than *Lie Down in Darkness* in terms of sales and general popular awareness. So I'm not knocking the success I had but, as I say, it was relatively limited and wasn't the kind of success which could really turn my head.

ARCHIVE: Is there more or less opportunity today for a young novelist than in the early fifties?

STYRON: I suspect that it hasn't changed a lot. I think the statistics would indicate that they're publishing fewer first novels now than then, but I don't know if the difference is significant. I think it's always been difficult for a first novelist, and probably will continue to be, but I don't think that spells doom for the first novel by any means.

ARCHIVE: In 1955, in a novelists' symposium sponsored by *American Scholar* magazine, you made some remarks about the lack of audience American writers were faced with; you said that they were in effect talking to a hundred and sixty million deaf people. Do you feel that the audience for fiction now is any better, or any worse?

STYRON: Well, I would modify what I said, I guess, to this extent. I don't think a writer in this country or any country is going to reach vast multitudes and he never has and never will, with some exceptions like the Soviet Union, where the culture is so arranged that poets for instance do reach multitudes. I think that probably when I made that statement I was deluded into thinking that for some reason writers in this country would reach millions of people; well, they don't really, they reach a considerable

number. I'm no longer unhappy about that situation. Though one could wish for a higher level of literacy and lots more readers, I think good writers reach a significant number of people. I wish it could be more but I don't feel tragic about it.

ARCHIVE: Why have you never been attracted to the short story as a form?

STYRON: Well, possibly because I don't think that the short story is any longer or has been a very interesting or vital form compared to the novel. There was a time, when I was beginning to write, when the short story was of intense interest to anyone who was writing or who was involved in literature in any way. There was, for instance, a magazine called *Story* magazine, which was run by a man named Whit Burnett, and he had published back in the thirties countless well-known writers. Anyone who wrote read *Story* magazine. One was still preoccupied with the short story as a very vital, interesting form, in the tradition of Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, even Faulkner. Then something seemed to happen in the fifties and sixties — largely having to do with outlets, the fact that so many magazines began to fold up. The number of places where one published short stories diminished, and the few that were left, for instance the *New Yorker*, had very specific rules for writing them. Practically all of my contemporaries have occasionally written short stories, but with the possible significant exception of John Updike, most of the writers I know no longer write them. I haven't seen a short story by Mailer in years, or Jim Jones, or Baldwin. One after another. Saul Bellow wrote very few short stories. So I think that's one of the reasons; it has to do with the falling-off of the media. Then another reason, a personal reason, is that I never felt terribly secure in the form. It's something I never perhaps mastered. I always felt the necessity to spread out, to do a larger and longer thing, though I think that one could say that a novel of any complexity is often a series of strung-out short stories. But that's more or less beside the point. The main thing is that I've always felt that the novel allowed me the larger scope to say what I wanted to say, whereas short stories seemed to confine and restrict me.

ARCHIVE: In the same *American Scholar* symposium, "What's Wrong with the American Novel," you indicated your interest in writing for television. I was wondering if you ever followed up on that.

STYRON: Gave that up completely. I suppose in 1955 television looked as if it still might have some promise, but it clearly did not, and I never wrote anything for television. *The Long March* was made into a television drama, but I had nothing to do with it, and it was a disaster. That's something I've never even given a second thought to since I made that statement.

ARCHIVE: Why did you decide to write a play, *In the Clap Shack*, after twenty years of writing only fiction?

STYRON: Well, for several reasons. I had an outlet, which was the Yale Repertory Theater. I'd been friends with the people involved in the

company for a long time, and I'd never written a play and decided to try my hand at it. I found it a very pleasurable experience, but one I don't really want to duplicate if I can help it. I don't think that playwriting is as central to literature as the novel is. Oddly enough we talk about the death or decline of the novel, but it's still the most significant literary form we have. It really is quite remarkably alive, and that's why I sort of stick with it.

ARCHIVE: Have you ever written poetry?

STYRON: Yeah. I wrote some horrible poetry when I was in the Marine Corps, and I hope I destroyed it all. But that's just a little flight I took years ago, and I haven't since then.

ARCHIVE: There's never been the impulse?

STYRON: Well, I never mastered the technique of poetry, alas. I'd like to write music, too, but one has to go to school to learn how, and poetry requires a certain formal learning which I never had. I'm sure that it's not so intricate in itself that I couldn't even at this late date master it, or at least learn what it's all about. It seems a little late to start, though of course Thomas Hardy wrote all his great poetry in his middle and later years. I have great respect for poetry. When I say the novel is the central literary form I still mean it, but I would say that poetry is of course constant and universal and never loses its ultimate appeal, though I don't think it has the appeal for the numbers of people that the novel does.

ARCHIVE: As you look back on it now, are you disappointed that so much of the critical attention given to *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was focussed on the political and moral, rather than the esthetic, implications of the book?

STYRON: It was, I think, inevitable that that reaction occurred at that particular moment. I don't think it would have if the book had been written four years earlier or four years later. It was annoying and exasperating, but it wasn't totally without value, because it certainly drew focus to the book. Much of the attack was completely blind and false, as you're probably aware. It was a political thing, and to that extent it did disappoint me. But it's all over now, and the book has its own life, and whatever meaning it has it will continue to have.

ARCHIVE: At that time much was made of your audacity in projecting yourself into the psyche of a nineteenth-century black man. Few of the critics seemed to notice that *Nat Turner* was audacious on a more basic level, simply in being an historical novel with large artistic intentions. George Steiner in his *New Yorker* review did mention in this connection the historical novels of Thackeray and Robert Graves. But I can't think of any *American* writers of comparable stature who have written historical fiction. Why do you suppose this is?

STYRON: I would say there are some exceptions to that. Faulkner for instance plunged into the deep past occasionally, with his stories of the Indians in

the Mississippi Delta in the early 1800's. Robert Penn Warren has done it several times; *World Enough and Time* dealt with history, and is a very good book. Yet, in general, I think you're right. Most American writers have shied away from it. For what reason I don't know. Except that maybe it's become such a cliché that the historical novel is the province of lady writers who are writing costume melodramas. You see, I think with *Nat Turner* it was one of those relatively rare situations in which the subject itself could so well illuminate larger dimensions of human experience including our own present-day experience, our racial anguish and so on. So that it was a kind of gift from the heavens, almost, that I had that. Because for one thing I had a very obscure historical figure in Nat Turner, a man about whom almost nothing is known, as opposed to, say, John Brown, about whom everything is known practically. So it was kind of a perfect setup for a historical treatment, and I don't think these ideal situations come along too frequently. There's often something terribly wooden about even a first-rate writer's attempt to deal with history, because it doesn't have any resonance. You say: interesting, but so what? I don't mean to dismiss the form, but I think that that is the problem, that the historical novel is so often an exercise in past events which have very little relevance to our own time. I think this is what often makes the historical novel empty. But it need not be, if one can find the metaphor that's at the center of the historical event, and I think I found it with Nat Turner.

ARCHIVE: We've learned to wait six to ten years for a new Styron novel, and I was wondering, if it's the actual process of writing which takes you so long, or are there stretches in which you do no writing at all?

STYRON: I do a considerable amount of writing and destroying, or writing inconsequentially, making massive notes. There are quite honestly times when I don't write, or when I'm writing a review or an essay or something like that. So it depends. But my mind is very rarely off the subject at hand. Even when I'm not writing I'm concentrating rather ferociously on the subject I'm addressing myself to.

ARCHIVE: Back in 1971 we thought on the basis of a piece in *Esquire* called "Marriott the Marine" that you were working on a second novel about your Marine Corps experiences. What became of that book?

STYRON: It's one of those painful things that sometimes happens. I still have that novel very much in my mind, but something intervened. I found that I had reached an impasse, and that something else more important had to take over. I'm going to come back to *Marriott the Marine* or whatever it will be called, *The Way of the Warrior* or whatever. But in the meantime I've written going on five hundred pages of a novel which simply for my own satisfaction I had to do, and that's the one I'm writing now.

ARCHIVE: This is *Sophie's Choice*, the novel that was excerpted in last September's *Esquire*?

STYRON: Yeah. As I say, the Marriott thing is only postponed; I definitely intend to get back to it, and I know just what I want to do. But this had to come first.

ARCHIVE: So you're fairly well along in *Sophie's Choice*?

STYRON: I'm well into it, yes. I've written four to five hundred pages, with several hundred more to go. It sounds like it's going to be huge, but it's not going to be all that big; it'll be about the length of *Nat Turner*.

ARCHIVE: Do you have any idea when we'll see the rest of it?

STYRON: I'd like to think I'll get it done within a year.

ARCHIVE: After you published *Nat Turner*, which you've said is the book you always wanted to write, and then found yourself in the center of what must have been a pretty exhausting controversy, and finally won the Pulitzer Prize — did you find you had gotten off the track at all, did you find it hard to settle back down to the business of writing?

STYRON: I don't know quite how to answer that, except to say that for me writing — and other writers have it easier, I suppose, but for me writing has been the struggle to find a theme which makes it all worthwhile. And in the case of the novel I'm now writing, rightly or wrongly I feel that I've got the theme that is worthy of my own struggle. It's a complex book, but basically it's about one of the central facts of our century, which is what the Nazis did in the concentration camps.

ARCHIVE: Then part of the book will actually be set in the camps?

STYRON: Much of what I've already written is actually set in Auschwitz, which of course symbolically was the most horrible one of all. And that's a problem; that's what's given me both the impetus to write the book and the difficulties. Because I realized I was taking a subject which, like *Nat Turner*, was something that was not a matter of first-hand experience on my part. I'd never been a slave, I hadn't been a black man, and I hadn't lived in the nineteenth century. In this case, I never suffered in a concentration camp, nor was I a woman, because as the title indicates the central figure is a woman, *Sophie*.

ARCHIVE: Isn't this in fact considerably more of a risk than *Nat Turner*, in that as you've said so little is known about *Nat* that it seemed legitimate for you to recreate his character out of whole cloth, whereas there are a lot of survivors of the camps still around who can point to the new book and say, "That's not how it was. How does *he* know?"

STYRON: Yeah, the risk is certainly there. I only hope that my strategy circumvents the worst aspects of this risk because I say quite frankly in the heart of the book that I'm aware of taking a risk, and also that I do *not* intend to recapitulate so much of what we already know about the camps — the beatings, the gassings, the torture, the medical experiments and so on. As a matter of fact, I deal intensely with a certain aspect of the camp in the same way I dealt with slavery through *Nat Turner*. There was a lot of the whole world of slavery that I didn't touch on — slavery at it's rawest,

nastiest, dirtiest level. I had this house-slave, literate, a man of sensitivity, through whom I could try to filter my own attitude toward slavery. The same thing applies here. I don't have any episodes which deal directly with the camp on its most brutal, rawest level. What I've done, which I hope will work, is to take my heroine and juxtapose her against the Commandant of Auschwitz, who of course was a real historical figure, in a situation within the camp but removed from the day-to-day horror of people being beaten and tortured and so on. It's a very complex book. It has to do with this Polish gal Sophie and her guilt, and it has to do with history. It is autobiographical to some extent. When I was living in Brooklyn after I'd left Duke years ago, I did meet a girl who was a survivor of Auschwitz. She didn't play an important part in my life, and I left Brooklyn and never saw her again, but she haunted me. I suppose it's taken years for Auschwitz itself to register on my consciousness. But to my mind, it's never been dealt with very well either in European literature, where it should have made its big impact, or in American literature. As a theme it's almost nonexistent in American literature. And it's strange, because it is I think one of the central events of human history, and it's happened very, very recently. So much is encapsulated in Auschwitz, the total domination and dehumanization of human beings by other human beings on a scale no one could have dreamed of. And it's not been dealt with. It's just now beginning to be understood in all its complexity. The fact for instance that Auschwitz was a place which was indeed for extermination but was also for the enslavement of people. This fascinates me, maybe for the same reason I was fascinated by Nat Turner, the idea of slavery as a function in the human equation. At any rate, it's challenged me and I'm taking it up. My strategy has been to do it as an autobiographical novel in which the narrator, this fairly innocent young man, meets this gal, this survivor, Sophie, and learns through her gradually the incredible horror that happened in Europe within his own lifetime. If you read that piece in *Esquire*, you can see that it goes off the track. There's no mention there of Auschwitz at all. So it's intentionally autobiographical on one level, and completely imaginatively fictional on another. The stuff about Auschwitz is totally made up. But again, as with Nat Turner, I've done nothing to betray the historical record. We'll see. I expect I'll get a lot of flak for this book, too.

ARCHIVE: Well, isn't anything new written on the camps bound to be controversial? That book last year by Terrence Des Pres, for instance . . .

STYRON: I read the Des Pres book, and I couldn't make head nor tail of it. It didn't correspond to anything I understand about Auschwitz. It seemed to be filled with sort of weird, spurious optimism and faith. I read Bruno Bettelheim's rebuttal in the *New Yorker*, which I thought was extremely good, very powerful. He simply said, this isn't true, what Des Pres is trying to say. I agree with him, because what I think I'm trying to say is

that this was the ultimate horror that human beings are capable of, so horrible that you can't make a positive statement about it. You can't say, "Isn't it wonderful they survived?" They're just damn *lucky* they survived. And some of them not so lucky, some of them still suicidal, as Bettelheim pointed out. So my work is pretty pessimistic. Well, I won't go into a detailed synopsis of it, but Sophie, the heroine, who is a survivor and living in Brooklyn, does commit suicide. It's not a book to cause one to rejoice in the human condition. Nor did I intend it to be. I think it's the total antithesis of Des Pres' thesis.

ARCHIVE: And yet that piece that appeared in *Esquire*, "The Seduction of Leslie," that struck me as being closer to pure cheerfulness than anything you'd ever written. It really was very pleasant, funny, almost light reading. Won't it be strange to have that sort of thing in the same book?

STYRON: Well, the novel contains parallel stories which fuse. On one level there's the young narrator, the graduate of Duke who's working at McGraw-Hill as an editor, and his almost picaresque adventures as he flounders about and tries to find himself after being fired from McGraw-Hill and going to Brooklyn and meeting these people, including Sophie and Leslie, though Leslie's sort of an appendage to the story. I think I've tried to convey an open, spacious sense of experience, in that here's this young man, this innocent who's gone through World War II, which was from an American angle a very innocent, rather lucky war. Parenthetically I remember reading the statistics not too long ago and our casualties were about 250,000, which of course is not negligible and should be mourned, but compare this to Russia, where 20 million died. I mean, we emerged from World War II still in a state of extreme innocence. We came no where near experiencing the anguish of Europe. Especially of the Slavs — the Russians, the Poles, and so on. And of course the multitudes of Jews who were exterminated. But another thing I wanted to point out is that so rarely do you see any awareness of the fact that multitudes of Poles who were *not* Jews died in those camps just like flies. Sophie for instance is not Jewish, but her suffering is vast. So I wanted to take this twenty-two-year-old fellow in America in the peaceable year of 1947, his innocence, his artlessness, his kind of gullibility, and oppose against it this unspeakable experience of a girl who's a bit older than he but nonetheless roughly contemporary, and just see what I could make of it, see what kind of stops I could pull, and what final statement I had to make.

ARCHIVE: Moving to other writers for the moment, what do you think of such "experimental" novelists as Pynchon, Barth, Hawkes, Barthelme?

STYRON: I think sometimes they're very clever and interesting. But — I don't know. Fiction has to do something else besides what people like that tend to do with it. Gore Vidal recently wrote a piece for the *New York Review of Books* in which he called writers like Barth and Barthelme "research and

development writers." You know, as Reynolds Price says, Barth is the joy of most English professors because they can get out their little tool kits and work on his writing, take it apart and examine it like an engine or something, and put it back together and say, this metaphor works, and so on. But for me fiction has to do something more. It has to do what I think Faulkner was trying to do and did so often. It has to try and wipe you out. It has to immerse you in the mainstream of human experience and make you aware of the endless humor and tragedy of life, and its kind of confusion, and its humanness. I think these writers have gotten off on a tributary where language — and understand that I have the greatest respect for their ability with language — but where language is all, and where human action, the human component, is more or less lost or ignored or caricatured or twisted out of shape. I don't think you have to be a Philistine to make this sort of statement. But that's why this kind of writing has relatively little appeal for me.

ARCHIVE: Whom do you admire most among your contemporaries? Who do you think will last?

STYRON: Well, that's a question I tend to try to avoid answering. Not only because there are quite a few that I happen to know personally, which is a part of it, but because I just don't think we can say who will last. I will say, though, that the writers we just mentioned I do not foresee a long lifespan for.

ARCHIVE: Well, let me put it another way. Is there enough fiction being written today that satisfies you, the immersing kind of fiction? Do you think there's too little of it now as opposed to say the early fifties, have we gotten away from it too much?

STYRON: No, I think it's still being written, though at the moment the focus, probably inspired by the universities, is on the people that Gore Vidal called plastic writers. I think for instance Saul Bellow is an extremely good writer who has successfully avoided the sort of linguistic puzzles and conundrums of form which a lot of these other writers have gotten involved in. I think Bellow is soundly based in humanity. He's never strayed from the sense of the human being as the central participant in fiction. I would say this is true of somebody like John Cheever also. I would say that writers like this are more likely to live long than some of these other gentlemen whose names we've mentioned.

ARCHIVE: Do you think fiction in general is losing ground to journalism and other forms of non-fiction?

STYRON: I think fiction is still the most vital and exciting literary form. It still has a resonance in society, it can't be ignored, and even if we in this country are sometimes distracted away from it, the fact remains that in foreign countries American writing is devoured — it's studied, it's pored over, it's delighted in, it's a very important form of communication. You could always say the situation could be better, it could be like Victorian

England, you know, where everybody was reading Dickens. But I think that all things considered, fiction in America is still a very, very important esthetic and cultural force. I think certainly there is some small competition from journalism, and the practitioners of journalism who are good get some of the pie. Tom Wolfe and Mailer do interesting, valuable things and they're just the two that come to mind as being the best examples. I don't think one wants to undercut that kind of journalism, but I don't think it's usurped the other thing at all. I don't think it will, because so much journalism that was written as recently as six or seven years ago is already totally forgotten. In answer to your question, I don't think there's been any truly significant losing of ground. I think there are different mutations. There are larger difficulties — it is perhaps tougher now to get a first novel published. How much more tough I don't know. But I know some publishers and they're dying for good work, because they know among other things that it will sell. People still read in this country. All you have to do is write something and get it published, and you're always amazed at the number of letters you get. People read. Maybe not as much as they read in Russia, or as much as they used to, but I wouldn't be writing unless I thought that somewhere out there people were paying attention. In recent years a phenomenon has arisen in which a certain work becomes a big event, a publishing event — a book like *Ragtime* for instance, which is fine, a good book, but it sort of usurped the stage to a degree, people couldn't talk about anything else. Maybe that makes the whole thing a little unbalanced. And yet, far better that than to have nothing published at all. When *Sophie's Choice* comes out it will probably be an event, and that's both good and bad, but you can't do anything about it. It's sure going to get the same sort of fusillade as *Nat Turner*. Rabbis, Poles, ex-Nazis — they'll all be after my hide.

The Force of Her Happiness

(The following is an excerpt from a novel, *Sophie's Choice*, to be published by Random House. ©1977 by William Styron.)

"Stingo! Oh Stingo!" Late that same morning — a sunny June Sunday — I heard their voices on the other side of the door, rousing me from sleep. Nathan's voice, then Sophie's: "Stingo, wake up! Wake up, Stingo!" The door itself, while not locked, was secured by a night chain, and from where I lay against the pillow I could see Nathan's beaming face as he peered at me through the wide crack in the door. "Rise and shine!" said the voice. "Hit the deck, kid! Up and at 'em, boy! We're going to Coney Island!" And behind him I heard Sophie, in clear piping echo of Nathan: "Rise and shine! Up and at 'em!" Her command was followed by a silvery little giggle, and now Nathan began to rattle the door and the chain. "Come on, Cracker, hit the deck! You can't lie there all day snoozin' like some ole hound dog down south." His voice took on the syrupy synthetic tones of deepest Dixieland — an accent, though, to my sleep-drugged but responsive ears, that was the product of remarkably deft mimicry. "Stir them lazy bones, honey chile," he drawled in the munchiest compone, "put on yo' bathin' costume. We gonna hab old Pompey hitch up the old coach-an'-foah and hab us a little picnic outin' down by the sea shoah!"

I was — to put it in restrained terms — somewhat less than exhilarated by all this. His snarling insult of the night before, and his general mistreatment of Sophie, had trespassed on my dreams all night in various allusive masks and guises, and now to awake to behold the same mid-century urban face intoning these hokey antebellum lyrics was simply more than I could tolerate. Without even bothering to stretch, I leaped straight out of the bedclothes and hurled myself at the door. "Get out of here!" I yelled. "Leave me alone!"

I tried to slam the door in Nathan's face but he had one foot firmly entrenched in the crack. "Get out!" I shouted again. "You have your goddamned nerve, harassing me like this on a Sunday morning! Get your goddamned foot out of that door and leave me the fuck alone!"

"Stingo, Stingo," the voice went on in lulling cadences, having reverted to the Brooklyn style, "Stingo, take it easy! No offense meant, kid. Come on, open up! Let's have a coffee together and make up and be pals."

"I don't *want* to be pals with you!" I howled at Nathan. I burst into a fit of coughing. Half-strangling on the goo and crud of three-score daily Camels, I was surprised that I was coherent at all. As I hacked away, oddly embarrassed at the croupy noise I was making, I began to suffer further slow

surprise — and not a little distress — over the fact that the atrocious Nathan had materialized like some wicked genie at Sophie's side, and seemed once more to be in possession and command. For at least a minute, perhaps longer, I shuddered and heaved in the throes of a pulmonary spasm, having had in the meantime to endure the humiliation of submitting to Nathan in the role of medical savant: "You've got a regular smoker's cough there, Cracker. You also have the haggard, drawn face of a person hooked on nicotine. Look at me for a second, Cracker, look me straight in the eye."

I glared at him through leisurely narrowing pupils fogged over with rage and loathing. "Don't call me—" I began, but the words were cut off by another racking cough.

"Haggard, that's the word," Nathan went on, "too bad for such a nice-looking guy. The haggard look comes from being slowly deprived of oxygen. You should cut out smoking, Cracker. It causes cancer of the lung. Also lousy on the heart." (I inject a technical but necessary parenthesis here. In 1947, it may be remembered, the truly pernicious effect of cigarette smoking on the health was barely surmised even by medical men, and word of its potential erosive damage, when uttered at all, was greeted by sophisticates with amused skepticism. It was an old wives' tale of the same category as that in which it was imputed to masturbation such scourges as acne, or warts, or madness. Therefore, although Nathan's remark was doubly infuriating at the time, piling, as I thought, imbecility on plain viciousness, I realize now how weirdly prescient it really was, how typical it was of that erratic, daft, tormented, but keenly honed and magisterial intelligence I was to get to know and find myself too often pitted against. Fifteen years later, while in the toils of a successful battle with my addiction to cigarettes, I would recall Nathan's admonition — for some reason especially that word *haggard* — like a voice from the grave.) Now, however, his words were an invitation to manslaughter.

"Don't call me Cracker!" I cried, recovering my voice, "I'm a Phi Beta Kappa from Duke University! I don't have to take your rotten insults! Now you get your foot out of that door and leave me alone!" I struggled vainly to dislodge his shoe from the crack. I was on the verge of stamping on it with my bare heel. "And I don't need any cheap advice about cigarettes," I rasped through the clogged and inflamed flues of my larynx.

Then Nathan underwent a remarkable transformation. His manner suddenly became apologetic, civilized, almost contrite. "All right, Stingo, I'm sorry," he said, "I'm sorry, I really am. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. Forgive me, will you? I won't use that word again. Sophie and I just wanted to extend a little friendly welcome on a beautiful summer day." It was positively breathtaking, this swift change in him, and I might have felt that he was simply indulging in another form of leaden sarcasm had my instincts not told me that he was sincere. In fact I sensed he was suffering a rather painful over-reaction, as people sometimes do when, after thoughtlessly

teasing a child, they realize they have caused real anguish. But I was not to be moved.

"Scram!" I said flatly and firmly. "I want to be alone."

"I'm *sorry*, old pal, I really am! I was just kidding a little with that Cracker bit. I really didn't mean to offend you."

"No, Nathan really didn't mean to offend you," Sophie chimed in. She moved from behind Nathan to a spot where I could see her clearly. And something about her once more tugged away at my heart. Unlike the portrait of misery she had presented the night before, she was now plainly flushed with high spirits and joy at Nathan's miraculous return. It was possible almost to feel the force of her happiness; it flowed from her body in visible little glints and tremors — in the sparkle of her eyes, and in her animated lips, and in the pink exultant glow that colored her cheeks like rouge. This happiness, together with the look of appeal on that radiant face, was something that even in my disheveled morning state I found altogether seductive — no, irresistible. "Please, Stingo," she pleaded, "Nathan didn't mean to offend you, to hurt your feelings. We just wanted to make friends and take you out on a beautiful summer day. Please. *Please* come with us!"

Nathan relaxed — I felt his foot move away from the crack — and I relaxed, not without a severe pang, however, at the sight of him, as he suddenly grabbed Sophie around the waist and commenced to nuzzle her cheek. With the lazy appetite of a calf mooning over a salt lick, he smeared his sizeable nose against her face, which caused her to emit a gay burbling laugh, like the fragment of a carol, and when he flicked at her earlobe with the pink tip of his tongue she gave the most faithful imitation of a cat's electric purr I had ever seen or heard. It was a dumbfounding tableau. Only brief hours before he was ready to slice her throat.

Sophie pulled the trick. I was helpless in the face of her plea, and mumbled a grudging, "Well, O.K." Then just as I was at the point of unfastening the chain and letting them in, I changed my mind.

"Screw off," I said to Nathan, "you owe me an apology."

"I *apologized*," he replied. His voice was deferential. "I *said* I wouldn't call you Cracker any more."

"Not just that," I retorted. "The bit about lynching and all that crap. About the South. It's an *insult*. Suppose I told you that somebody with a name like Landau couldn't be anything but a fat, hook-nosed, miserly pawnbroker out to cheat trusting gentiles. It'd make you *mad*! It works both ways, these slurs. You owe me another apology." I realized I had become a little pompous, but I was adamant.

"O.K., I'm sorry for that *too*," he said expansively, warmly, "I know I was off base there. Let's forget it, O.K.? I beg your pardon, honestly. But we're serious about taking you on a little outing today. Look, why don't we leave it like this? It's early yet. Why don't you take your time and get dressed and then come upstairs to Sophie's room. We'll all have a beer or coffee or

something. Then we'll go to Coney Island. We'll have lunch in a great seafood restaurant I know down there, and then we'll go to the beach. I've got a good friend who makes extra money Sundays working as a lifeguard. He lets us lie on a special restricted part of the beach where there aren't any people to kick sand in your face. So come on."

Sulking rather obviously, I said: "I'll think about it."

"Ah, be a sport, come on!"

"All right," I said, "I'll come." To which I added a tepid: "Thanks."

While I shaved and slicked myself up, I reflected with puzzlement on this odd turn of events. What devious motive, I wondered, caused such a goodwill gesture? Could it be that Sophie had urged Nathan toward this cordial move, perhaps to get him to make up for his nastiness of the night before? Or was he simply out to obtain something else? I knew the ways of New York well enough by now to at least give passing credence to the idea that Nathan might just be some sort of con man, out to hustle up something as commonplace and as obvious as money. (This prompted me to check the condition of the slightly more than \$400 I had secreted at the back of the medicine chest, in a box meant for Johnson & Johnson gauze bandages. The loot, in tens and twenties, was intact, causing me as usual to whisper a loving little threnody to my spectral patron Artiste, moldering to dust these many years in Georgia.) But that seemed an unlikely suspicion, after Morris Fink's observation about Nathan's singular affluence. Nonetheless, all these possibilities floated about in my head as I prepared with some misgivings to join Sophie and Nathan. I really felt I ought to stay and try to work, try to set some words down on the yawning yellow page, even if they be inane and random jottings. But Sophie and Nathan had quite simply laid siege to my imagination. What I really wondered about was the smoochy detente between the two of them, re-established short hours after the most harrowing scene of lovers' strife I could imagine this side of a low-grade Italian opera. Then I considered the fact that they both simply might be crazy, or outcast like Paolo and Francesca, caught up in some weird, shared perdition.

Morris Fink was informative as usual, if not particularly illuminating, when I ran into him in the hallway just as I was leaving my room. While we were exchanging banalities I became for the first time aware of a church bell chiming, far-off but distinct, in the direction of Flatbush Avenue. At once poignant and reminiscent of southern Sundays, it also unnerved me a little since I had the firm impression that synagogues did not come equipped with belfries. Very briefly I closed my eyes as the chimes descended on the stillness, thinking of a homely brick church in a Tidewater town, piety and Sabbath hush, the dewy little Christian lambs with flowerstalk legs trouping to the Presbyterian tabernacle with their Hebrew history books and Judaical catechisms. When I opened my eyes Morris was explaining: "No, that's no synagogue. That's the Dutch Reformed church up at Church Avenue and

Flatbush. They only ring it on Sundays. I go by there sometime when they got a service going. Or Sunday School. They sing their fuckin' heads off. *Jesus Loves Me*. Shit like that. Those Dutch Reformed broads are something. A lot of them look like they need a blood transfusion. . . . Or a hot meat injection." He gave a lewd snort. "The cemetery's nice, though. In the summer it's cool in there. Some of these wild Jewish kids go in there at night and get laid."

"Well, Brooklyn's got a little bit of everything, hasn't it?" I said.

"Yeah. All religions. Jewish, Irish, Italian, Dutch Reformed, boogies, everything. Lots of boogies comin' in now, since the war. Williamsburg. Brownsville. Bedford-Stuyvesant, that's where they're movin' into. Fuckin' apes, I call 'em. Boy, do I hate those boogies. Apes! Aaaa-gh!" He gave a shudder and, baring his teeth, made what I took to be a simian grimace. Just as he did so, the regal, celebrant strains of Handel's *Water Music* shimmered down the stairs from Sophie's room. And very faintly from above I heard Nathan's laughter.

"I guess you got to meet Sophie and Nathan," Morris said.

I allowed that I had, in a manner of speaking, met them.

"What do you think of that Nathan? Don't he break your balls?" A sudden light glowed in the lusterless eyes, his voice became conspiratorial. "You know what I think he is? A golem, that's what. Some kind of a golem."

"Golem?" I said. "What on earth's a golem?"

"Well, I can't explain exactly. It's a Jewish — what do you call it? — not exactly religious, but some kind of *monster*. He's been invented, that's what, like Frankenstein, see, only he's been invented by a rabbi. He's made out of clay or some kind of shit like that, only he looks like a human. Anyway, you can't control him. I mean sometimes he acts normal, just like a normal human. But deep down he's a runaway fuckin' *monster*. That's a golem. That's what I mean about Nathan. He acts like a fuckin' golem."

With a vague stir of recognition, I asked Morris to elaborate on his theory.

"Well this morning early, see, I guess you were asleep, I see Sophie go into Nathan's room. My room is right across the hall and I can see everything. It's about seven-thirty or eight. I heard them fightin' last night so I know that Nathan's gone. Now guess what I see next? This is what I see. Sophie's cryin', softly, but still cryin' her head off. When she goes into Nathan's room she leaves the door open and lays down. But guess where she lays down? On the bed? No! On the fuckin' *floor*! She lays down on the *floor* in her nightgown, all curled up like a baby. I watch her for a while, maybe ten, fifteen minutes — you know, thinkin' it's crazy for her to be in Nathan's room layin' on the *floor* like that — and then all of a sudden down below on the street I hear a car drive up and I look out the window and there's Nathan. Did you hear him when he came in? He made a hell of a lot of noise, stampin' and bangin' and mutterin' to himself."

"No, I was sound asleep," I replied. "My noise problem there — in the crater, as you call it — seems to be mainly vertical. Directly overhead. The

rest of the house I can't hear, thank heaven."

"Anyway, Nathan comes upstairs and goes to his room. He goes through the door and there's Sophie all curled up and layin' on the floor. He walks over to her and stands there — she's awake — and this is what he says. He says, 'Get out of here, you whore!' Sophie doesn't say anything, just lays there cryin', I guess, and Nathan says, 'Get your ass out of here, whore, I'm leavin'!' Still Sophie doesn't say anything and I begin to hear her cry and cry and then Nathan says 'I'm going to count to three, whore, and if you're not up and out of here and out of my sight I'm going to kick your ass into the middle of next year!' And then he counts to three and she doesn't move and then he begins to kick the livin' shit out of her."

"While she's *lying* there?" I put in. I had begun to wish that Morris had not felt the need to tell me this story. My stomach stirred with queasy sickishness; though a man of non-violence, I was nearly overwhelmed by the impulse to rush upstairs where, accompanied by the *Water Music's* sprightly bourree, I would somehow exorcise the golem by battering its brains out with a chair. "You mean he actually *kicked* that girl while she was lying there like that?"

"Yeah, he kept kickin' her. *Hard*, too, with the point of his shoe. Right in the fuckin' ribs he kept kickin' her."

"Why didn't you *do* something?" I demanded.

He hesitated, cleared his throat, then said: "Well, if you want to know, I'm a physical coward. I'm five-foot-five and that Nathan — he's a big motherfucker. But I'll tell you one thing. I *did* think about calling the police. Sophie was beginning to groan, those kicks must have hurt like a bastard. So I decided to come down here and call the police on the phone. I didn't have anything on, I don't wear anything sleeping. So I went to my closet and put on a bathrobe and slippers — tryin' to move fast, see? Who knows, I thought he might *kill* her! I guess I was gone about a minute, at first I couldn't find my fuckin' slippers. Then when I got back to the door—" He paused again. "Guess what?"

"I can't imagine."

"This time it's the other way around. Like it's opposite, see? This time Sophie's sittin' up on the floor with her legs crossed, and Nathan's sort of crouched down and he's got his head buried right in her crotch. I don't mean he's *eatin'* her. He's *cryin'*! He's got his face right down in there and he's cryin' away like a baby. And all this time Sophie's strokin' that black hair of his and whisperin', 'That's all right, that's all right.' And I hear Nathan say, 'Oh God, how could I do it to you? How could I hurt you?' Things like that. Then, 'I love you, Sophie, I love you.' And she just sayin', 'That's all right,' and makin' little cluckin' noises, and him with his nose in her crotch, cryin' and sayin' over and over again, 'Oh Sophie, I love you so.' *Ach*, I almost heaved up my breakfast."

"And what then?"

"I couldn't take any more of it. When they finished all this crap and got up off the floor, I went out and got a Sunday paper and walked over into the park and read for an hour. I didn't want to have anything more to do with either of them. But see what I mean? I mean—" He paused and his eyes morosely probed me for some interpretation of this evil masque. I had none. Then Morris said decisively: "A golem, if you ask me. A fuckin' golem."

I made my way upstairs in a black squall of gusty, shifting emotion. I kept saying to myself that I couldn't get involved with these sick characters. Despite the grip that Sophie had laid upon my imagination, and despite my loneliness, I was certain that it would be foolhardy to seek their friendship. I felt this not only because I was afraid of getting sucked toward the epicenter of such a volatile, destructive relationship but because I had to confront the hard fact that I, Stingo, had other fish to fry. I had come to Brooklyn ostensibly "to write my guts out," as dear old Farrell had put it, not to play the hapless supernumerary in some tortured melodrama. I resolved to tell them that I would not go with them to Coney Island after all; that done, I would politely but decisively nudge them out of my life, making it plain that I was a solitary spirit who was not to be disturbed, ever.

I knocked and entered as the last record ceased playing, and the great barge with its jubilant trumpets vanished around a turning on the Thames. Sophie's room smote me instantly with delight. Though I know an eyesore when I see one, I have had very little sense of "taste," of decor; yet I could tell that Sophie had achieved a kind of triumph over the inexhaustible pink. Rather than let the pink bully her, she had fought back, splashing the room with complementary hues of orange and green and red — a bright carnation bookcase here, a marigold bedspread there — and thus had vanquished the omnipresent and puerile stain. I wanted to burst out laughing at the way she had imbued that dumb Navy camouflage paint with such joy and warmth. And there were flowers. Flowers were everywhere — daffodils, tulips, gladioli; they sprouted from small table vases and from sconces on the wall. The place was fragrant with fresh flowers, and although they were abundant there was no feeling of the sickroom amid all these blooms; they seemed instead simply festive, perfectly consonant with the gay flavor of the rest of the room. But I suddenly realized that Sophie and Nathan were nowhere in sight. Just as I was puzzling this out, I heard a giggle and saw a Japanese screen in one of the far corners give a little vibration. Then from behind the screen, hand in hand, flashing uniform vaudevillian smiles, came Sophie and Nathan dancing a little two-step and wearing some of the most bewitchingly tailored clothes I had ever seen. More nearly costumes really, they were decidedly out of fashion — his being a white chalk-stripe gray flannel double-breasted suit of the kind made modish more than fifteen years before by the Prince of Wales; hers a pleated plum-colored satin skirt of the same period, a white flannel yachting jacket, and a burgundy beret tilted over her

brow. Yet there was nothing hand-me-down about these two relics, they were clearly expensive and too well-fitting to be anything but custom made. I felt desolate in my white Arrow shirt and its rolled-up sleeves and with my nondescript baggy slacks.

"Don't worry," Nathan said a few moments later, while he was fetching a quart bottle of beer from the refrigerator, and Sophie was setting out cheese and crackers. "Don't worry about your clothes. Just because we dress up like this is no reason for you to feel uncomfortable. It's just a little fad of ours." I had slumped pleasurably in a chair, utterly shorn of my resolve to terminate our brief acquaintance. What caused this turnabout is almost impossible to explain. I suspect it was a combination of things. The delightful room, the unexpected and farcical costumery, the beer, Nathan's demonstrative warmth and eagerness to make amends, Sophie's calamitous effect on my heart — all these had wiped out my will power. Thus I was once again their pawn. "It's just a little hobby of ours," he went on to explain over, or through, limpid Vivaldi as Sophie bustled about in the kitchenette. "Today we're wearing early Thirties. But we've got clothes from the Twenties, World War One period, Gay Nineties, even earlier than that. Naturally, we only dress up like this on a Sunday or a holiday when we're together."

"Don't people stare?" I asked. "And isn't it kind of expensive?"

"Sure they stare," he said, "that's part of the fun. Sometimes — like with our Gay Nineties outfit — we cause a hell of a commotion. As for expense, it's not much more expensive than regular clothes. There's this tailor on Fulton Street will make up anything I want so long as I bring him the right patterns. And those old patterns aren't hard to get."

I nodded agreeably. Although perhaps a touch exhibitionistic, it seemed a fairly harmless diversion. Certainly with their splendid good looks, emphasized even more by the contrast between his smoky Levantine features and her pale radiance, Sophie and Nathan would be an eyeeful sauntering along together in almost anything. "It was Sophie's idea," Nathan explained further, "and she's right. People look drab on the street. They all look alike, walking around in uniform. Gray flannel blah. Clothes like these have individuality. Style. That's why it's fun when people stare at us." He paused to fill my glass with beer. "Dress is important. It's part of being human. It might as well be a thing of beauty, something you take real pleasure in doing. And maybe in the process give other people pleasure. Though that's secondary."

Well, it takes all kinds, as I had been accustomed to hear from childhood. Dress. Beauty. Being human. What talk from a man who only shortly before had been mouthing savage words and, if Morris could be trusted, had been inflicting outrageous pain on this gentle creature now flitting about with plates and ashtrays and cheese, dressed like Ginger Rogers in an old movie. Now he could not have been more amiable and engaging. And as I relaxed fully, feeling the beer begin to softly effervesce throughout my limbs, I

conceded to myself that what he was saying had merit. After the hideous uniformity in dress of the post-war scene, especially in a man-trap like McGraw-Hill, what really was more refreshing to the eye than a little quaintness, a bit of eccentricity? Once again (I speak now from the vantage point of hindsight) Nathan was dealing in small auguries of the world to come.

"Look at her," he said, "isn't she something? Did you ever see such a dollbaby? Hey, dollbaby, come over here."

"I'm *busy*, can't you see?" Sophie said as she bustled about. "Fixing the fromage."

"Hey!" He gave an earsplitting whistle. "Hey, come over here!" He winked at me. "I can't keep my hands off her."

Sophie came over and plopped down in his lap. "Give me a kiss," he said.

"One kiss, that's all," she replied, and smacked him lightly at the side of his mouth. "There! One kiss is all you deserve."

As she squirmed on his lap he nibbled at her ear and squeezed her waist, causing her adoring face to glow so visibly that I could have sworn he had twisted some kind of knob. "I can't keep my hands off you-u-u," he hummed. Like others, I am embarrassed by unprivate displays of affection or of hostility for that matter, especially when I am the solitary onlooker. I took a large swallow of beer and averted my eyes; they of course lit upon the outsized bed with its coverlet of luscious orange where my new friends had transacted most of these goings on, and which had been the monstrous engine of so much of my recent discomfort. Maybe my renewed outbreak of coughing betrayed me, or I suspect Sophie sensed my embarrassment; at any rate, she leaped up from Nathan's lap, saying, "Enough! Enough for you, Nathan Landau. No more kisses!"

"Come on," he complained, "one more."

"No more," she said sweetly but firmly, "we're going to have the beer and a little fromage and then we're all going to get on the subway train and go have lunch at Coney Island."

"You're a cheater!" he said in a kidding voice. "You're a *tease*! You're worse than any Jewish princess that ever came out of Brooklyn." He turned and regarded me with mock gravity. "What do you think of that, Stingo? Here I am pushing thirty years old. I fall crazy in love with a Polish shiksa and she keeps her sweet treasure all locked up as tightly as little Shirley Mirmelstein I tried to make out with for five whole years. What do you think of that?" Again, the sly wink.

"Bad news," I improvised in a jocular tone, "it's a form of sadism." Although I'm certain I kept my composure I was really vastly surprised at this revelation: Sophie was not Jewish! I could not really have cared less one way or another, but I was still surprised, and there was something vaguely negative and self-preoccupied in my reaction. Like Gulliver among the Hounyhnhnms I had rather thought myself a unique figure in this huge

Semitic *arrondissement* and was simply taken aback that Yetta's house should shelter another gentile. So Sophie was a shiksa. Well hush my mouth, I thought in mild wonder.

Sophie set before us a plate containing squares of toast upon which she had melted little sunbursts of golden Cheddar-like cheese. With the beer they tasted particularly delicious. I began to warm to the convivial, gently alcoholic mood of our tiny gathering as does a hound dog who slinks out from chill, comfortless shadows into the heat of the midday sun.

"When I first met this one here," Nathan said as she sat down on the rug beside his chair and contentedly leaned against his leg, "she was a rag and a bone and a hank of hair. And that was a whole year and a half after the Russians liberated that camp she was in. How much was it you weighed, sweetie?"

"Thirty-eight. Thirty-eight kilos."

"Yeah, about eighty-five pounds. Can you imagine? She was a *wraith*."

"How much do you weigh now, Sophie?" I asked.

"Just fifty."

"One hundred and ten pounds," Nathan translated, "which still isn't enough for her frame and height. She should weigh about one-seventeen, but she's getting there — she's getting there. We'll make a nice big milk-fed American girl out of her in no time." Idly, affectionately he fingered the butter-yellow strands of hair that curled out from beneath the rim of her beret. "But boy, was she a *wreck* when I first got hold of her. Here, drink some beer, sweetie. It'll help make you fat."

"I was a real wreck," Sophie put in, her tone affectingly lighthearted. "I looked like an old witch — I mean, you know, the thing that chases birds away. The scarecrow? I didn't have hardly any hair and my legs ached. I had the *scorbut*—"

"The scurvy," Nathan interjected, "she means she'd had the scurvy, which was cured as soon as the Russians took over—"

"*Le scorbut* — scurvy I mean — I had. I lose my front *teeth*! And typhus. And scarlet fever. And anemia. *All* of them. I was a real *wreck*." She uttered the litany of diseases with no self-pity yet with a certain childish earnestness, as if she were reciting the names of some pet animals. "But then I met Nathan and he took care of me."

"Theoretically she was saved as soon as the camp was liberated," he explained. "That is, she wasn't going to die. But then she was in a displaced persons' camp for a long time. And there were thousands of people there, tens of thousands, and they just didn't have the medical facilities to take care of all the damage that the Nazis had done to so many bodies. So then last year, when she arrived over here in America, she still had a quite serious, I mean a really serious case of anemia. I could tell."

"How could you tell?" I asked, with honest interest in his expertise.

Nathan explained, briefly, articulately, and with a straightforward

modesty that I found winning. Not that he was a physician, he said. He was, rather, a graduate in science from Harvard with a master's degree in cellular and developmental biology. It had been his achievement in this field of study which had led him to be hired as a researcher at Pfizer, a Brooklyn-based firm and one of the largest pharmaceutical houses in the nation. So much then for the background. He claimed no intricate or extensive medical knowledge, and had no use for the lay habit of venturing amateur diagnoses of illness; his training had, however, made him more than ordinarily enlightened about the chemical vagaries and ailments of the human body, and so the moment he first laid eyes on Sophie ("this sweetie," he murmured with enormous concern and gentleness, twisting the lock of her hair) he guessed, with dead accuracy as it turned out, that her ravaged appearance was the result of a deficiency anemia.

"I took her to a doctor, a friend of my brother's, who teaches at Columbia-Presbyterian. He does work in nutrition diseases." A proud note, not at all unattractive in the sense it conveyed of quiet authority, stole into Nathan's voice. "He said I was right on target. A critical deficiency of iron. We put the little sweetie here on massive doses of ferrous sulfate and she began to bloom like a rose." He paused and looked down at her. "A rose. A rose. A beautiful fucking rose." He lightly ran his fingers over his lips and transferred his fingertips to her brow, anointing it with his kiss. "God, you're something," he whispered, "you're the greatest."

She gazed up at him. She looked incredibly beautiful but somehow tired and drawn. I thought of the previous night's orgy of sorrow. She lightly stroked the blue-veined surface of his wrist. "Thank you, Monsieur Senior Researcher at Charles Pfizer Company," she said. For some reason I could not help but think: Jesus Christ, Sophie honey, we've got to find you a dialogue coach.

"And thank you for making me to bloom like a rose," she added after a moment.

All at once I became aware of the way in which Sophie echoed so much of Nathan's diction. Indeed, he *was* her dialogue coach, a fact which became more directly evident now as I heard him begin to correct her in detail, like an exceedingly meticulous, very patient instructor at a Berlitz school: "Not 'to bloom,' " he explained, "just 'bloom.' You're so good, it's about time you were *perfect*. You must begin to learn just when and where to add the preposition 'to' to the infinitive verb, and when to leave it out. You've had this problem ever since I first met you. And it's tough, you see, because in English there's no hard fast rule. You have to use your instinct."

"Instinct?" she said.

"You have to use your *ear*, so that it finally becomes instinct. Let me give you an example. You could say '*causing* me to bloom like a rose' but not '*making* me to bloom.' There's no rule about this, understand. It's just one of those odd little tricks of the language which you'll pick up in time." He

stroked her earlobe. "With that pretty ear of yours."

"Such a language!" she groaned, and in mock pain clutched her brow. "Too many words. I mean just the words for *vélocité*. I mean, 'fast.' 'Rapid.' 'Quick.' All the same thing! A scandal!"

"'Swift,'" I added.

"How about 'speedy'?" Nathan said.

"'Hasty,'" I went on.

"And 'fleet,'" Nathan said, "though that's a bit fancy."

"'Snappy!'" I said.

"Stop it!" Sophie said, laughing. "Too much! Too many words, this English. In French it is so simple, you just say '*vite*'."

"How about some more beer?" Nathan asked me. "We'll finish off this other quart and then go down to Coney Island and hit the beach." I noticed that Nathan drank next to nothing himself, but was almost embarrassingly generous with the Budweiser, keeping my glass topped off with unceasing attention. As for myself, in that brief time I had begun to achieve a benign, tingling high so surprisingly intense that I became a little uneasy trying to manage my own euphoria. It was an exaltation really, lofty as the summer sun; I felt buoyed up by fraternal arms holding me in a snug, loving, compassionate embrace. Part of what worked on me was, to be sure, only the coarse clutch of alcohol. The rest stemmed from all of those mingled elements comprising what, in that era so heavily burdened by the idiom of psychoanalysis, I had come to recognize as the *gestalt*: the blissful temper of the sunny June day, the ecstatic pomp of Mr. Handel's riverborne jam session, and this festive little room whose open windows admitted a fragrance of spring blossoms which pierced me with that sense of ineffable promise and certitude I don't recall having felt more than once or twice after the age of twenty-two, — or let us say twenty-five — when the ambitious career I had cut out for myself seemed so often to be the consequence of pitiable lunacy. Above all, however, my joy flowed out from some source I had not known since I had come to New York months before, and thought I had abandoned forever — fellowship, familiarity, sweet times among friends. The brittle aloofness with which I had so willfully armored myself I felt crumbling away utterly. How wonderful it was, I thought, to happen upon Sophie and Nathan — these warm and bright and lively new companions — and the urge I had to reach out and hug both of them close to me was (for the moment at least, despite my desperate crush on Sophie) freighted with the mellowest brotherhood, cleanly, practically devoid of carnal accents. Old Stingo, I murmured, grinning foolishly at Sophie but toasting myself with the foaming Bud, you've come back to the land of the living. "Salud, Stingo!" said Sophie, tipping in return the glass of beer which Nathan had pressed on her, and the grave and delectable smile she bestowed on me, bright teeth shining amid a scrubbed happy face still bruised with the shadows of deprivation, touched me so deeply that I made an

involuntary, choking sound of contentment. I felt close to total salvation.

Yet beneath my grand mood I was able to sense that there was something wrong. The terrible scene between Sophie and Nathan the night before should have been warning enough to me that our chummy little get-together, with its laughter and its ease and its gentle intimacy, was scarcely descriptive of the status quo as it existed between them. But I am a person who is too often weakly misguided by the external masquerade, quick to trust in such notions as that the ghastly blow-up I had witnessed was a lamentable but rare aberration in a lovers' connection whose prevailing tone was really hearts and flowers. I suppose the fact of the matter is that deep down I so hungered for friendship — was so infatuated with Sophie, and attracted with such perverse fascination to this dynamic, vaguely outlandish, wickedly compelling young man who was her inamorato — that I dared not regard their relationship in anything but the rosiest light. Even so, as I say, I could feel something distinctly out of joint. Beneath all the jollity, the tenderness, the solicitude, I sensed a disturbing tension in the room. I don't mean that the tension at that moment directly involved the two lovers. But there was tension, an unnerving strain, and most of it seemed to emanate from Nathan. He had become distracted, restless, and he got up and fiddled with the phonograph records, replaced the Handel with Vivaldi again, in obvious turmoil gulped a glass of water, sat down and drummed his fingers against his pants leg in rhythm to the celebrant horns.

Then swiftly he turned to me, peering at me searchingly with his troubled and gloomy eyes, and said: "Just an old briar-hopper, ain't you?" After a pause and with a touch of the bogus drawl he had baited me with before, he added: "You know, you Confederate types interest me. You-all —" and here he bore down on the 'all' — "you-all interest me very, very much."

I began to do, or undergo, or experience what I believe is known as a slow burn. This Nathan was incredible! How could he be so clumsy, so unfeeling — such a *creep*? My euphoric haze evaporated like thousands of tiny soap bubbles all at once. This swine! I thought. He had actually trapped me! How otherwise to explain this sly change in mood, unless it was to try to edge me into a corner? It was either clumsiness or craft: there was no other way to fathom such words, after I had so emphatically and so recently made it a condition of our amity — if such it might be called — that he would lay off his heavy business about the South. Once more indignation rose like a regurgitated bone in my gorge, though I made a last attempt to be patient. I turned up the butane under my Tidewater accent and said in a thick gluey voice: "Why, Nathan ole hoss, you Brooklyn folks interest us boys down home, too."

This had a distinctly adverse effect on Nathan. He was not only unamused, his eyes flashed warfare; he glowered at me with implacable mistrust, and for an instant I could have sworn I saw in those shining pupils the freak, the redneck, the alien he knew me to be.

"Oh fuck it," I said, starting to rise to my feet. "I'll just be going—"

But before I could set down my glass and get up he had clutched me by the wrist. It was not a rough or painful grasp, but he bore down strongly nonetheless, and insistently, and his grip held me fast in the chair. There was something desperately importunate in that grip which chilled me.

"It's hardly a joking matter," he said. His voice, though restrained, was I felt charged with turbulent emotion. Then his next words, spoken with deliberate, almost comical slowness, were like an incantation. "Bobby . . . Weed . . . *Bobby Weed!* Do you think Bobby Weed is worthy of nothing more than your attempt . . . at . . . humor?"

"It wasn't I who started that cotton-picking accent," I retorted: And I thought: *Bobby Weed!* Oh shit! Now he's going to get on Bobby Weed! Let me out of here.

Then at this moment Sophie, as if sensing the perhaps sinister shift in Nathan's mood, hurried to his side and touched his shoulder with a fluttery, nervously placating hand. "Nathan!" she said, "no more about Bobby Weed! Please, Nathan! It will just disturb you when we were having such a lovely time!" She cast me a look of distress. "All week he's been talking about Bobby Weed! I can't get him to stop." To Nathan again she begged: "Please darling, we were having such a lovely time!"

But Nathan was not to be deflected. "What about Bobby Weed?" he demanded of me.

"Well what *about* him, for Christ sake?" I groaned, and pulled myself upward out of his grasp. I had begun to eye the door and the intervening furniture, and quickly schemed out the best way of immediate exit. "Thanks for the beer," I muttered.

"I'll tell you what about Bobby Weed," Nathan persisted. He was not about to allow me off the hook, and dumped more foaming beer into the glass which he pressed into my hand. His expression still seemed calm enough but was betrayed by inner excitement in the form of a waggling, hairy didactic forefinger which he thrust into my face. "I'll tell you something about Bobby Weed, Stingo my friend. And that is *this!* You southern white people have a lot to answer for when it comes to such bestiality! You deny that? Then listen. I say this as one whose people have suffered the holocaust. I say this as a man who is deeply in love with one who survived the death camps!" He reached up and surrounded Sophie's wrist with his hand while the forefinger of his other hand still made its vermiform scrawl in the air above my cheekbone. "But mainly I say this as Nathan Landau, common citizen, research biologist, human being, witness to man's inhumanity to man. I say that the fate of Bobby Weed at the hands of white southern Americans is as bottomlessly barbaric as any act performed by the Nazis during the rule of Adolf Hitler! Do you agree with me?"

I bit the inside of my mouth in an effort to keep my composure. "What

happened to Bobby Weed, Nathan," I replied, "was horrible. Unspeakable! But I don't see any point in trying to equate one evil with another, or to assign some stupid scale of values. They're *both* awful! Would you mind taking your finger out of my face?" I felt my brow growing moist and feverish. "And I damn well question this big net you're trying to throw out to catch all of what you call *you southern white people*. Goddamn it, I'm not going to swallow that line! I'm *southern* and I'm *proud* of it but I'm not one of those pigs — those *troglodytes* who did what they did to Bobby Weed! I was born in Tidewater Virginia and if you'll pardon the expression I regard myself as a gentleman! Also, if you'll pardon me, this simplistic nonsense of yours, this *ignorance* coming from somebody so obviously intelligent as yourself truly *nauseates* me!" I heard my voice climb, quavering, cracked and no longer under control, and I feared another disastrous coughing fit as I watched Nathan calmly rising to his full height so that in effect we were confronting each other. Despite the now rather threatful forward-thrusting nature of his stance and the fact that he outmanned me in bulk and stature, I had the powerful urge to punch him in the jaw. "Nathan, let me tell *you* something. You are now dealing in the cheapest kind of New York-liberal, hypocritical horseshit! What gives you the right to pass judgment on millions of people, most of whom would die before they'd harm a Negro!"

"Ha!" he replied, "See, it's even in your speech pattern! *Nig-ro!* I find that so offensive!"

"It's the way we *say* it down there! It's not *meant* to offend. All right — *Knee-grow*. Anyway," I went on impatiently, "what gives you the right to pass judgment? *I find that* so offensive!"

"As a Jew, I regard myself as an authority on anguish and suffering." He paused and as he gazed at me now I thought I saw for the first time contempt in his look, and mounting disgust. "As for this 'New York liberal' evasion, this 'hypocritical horseshit' — I consider that a laughably feeble, insubstantial comeback to an honest accusation. Aren't you able to perceive the simple truth? Aren't you able to discern the truth in its awful outlines? And that is that your refusal to admit responsibility in the death of Bobby Weed is the same as that of those Germans who disavowed the Nazi party even as they watched blandly and unprotestingly as the thugs vandalized the synagogues and perpetrated the *Kristallnacht*. Can't you see the truth about yourself? About the South? After all, it wasn't the citizens of New York State who destroyed Bobby Weed!"

Most of what he was saying — especially about *my* "responsibility" — was lopsided, irrational, smug, and horrendously wrong, yet to my nearly total chagrin at that point I found that I could not answer. I was momentarily demoralized. I made an odd chirping sound in the back of my throat and moved in a sort of weak-kneed graceless lurch toward the window. Feeble, impotent though inwardly raging, I struggled for words that would not come. I swilled at a gulp the larger part of a glass of beer, looking through

eyes bleared with frustration down at the sunny pastoral lawns of Flatbush, the rustling sycamores and maples, decorous streets all gently astir with Sunday morning motion: shirtsleeved ballthrowers, churning bicycles, sun-dappled strollers on the walks. The scent of new-mown grass was rank, sweet, warmly green to the nostrils, reminding me of countryside prospects and distances — fields and lanes perhaps not too different from those once meandered upon by the young Bobby Weed, whom Nathan had implanted like a pulsing lesion in my brain. And as I thought of Bobby Weed I was overtaken by bitter, disabling despair. How could this infernal Nathan summon up the shade of Bobby Weed on such a ravishing day?

I listened to Nathan's voice behind me, high now, hectoring, reminiscent of that of a squat, half-hysteric Communist youth organizer with a mouth like a torn pocket I had once heard screaming up at the empty empyrean over Union Square. "The South today has abdicated any right to connection with the human race!" Nathan harangued me. "Each white southerner is accountable for the tragedy of Bobby Weed! No southerner escapes responsibility!"

I shivered violently, my hand jerked, and I watched my beer slosh greasily in its glass. Nineteen forty-seven. One, nine, four, seven. In that summer, twenty years almost to the month before the city of Newark burned down, and Negro blood flowed incarnadine in the gutters of Detroit, it was possible — if one was Dixie-born and sensitive and enlightened and aware of one's fearsome and ungodly history — to smart beneath such a tongue-lashing, even when one knew that it partook heavily of renascent abolitionist self-righteousness, ascribing to itself moral superiority so hygienic as to provoke tolerant though mirthless amusement. In less violent form, in subtle digs and supercilious little drawing room slanders, southerners who had ventured north were to endure such exploitative assaults upon their indwelling guilt during an era of unalleviated discomfort which ended officially on a morning in August, 1963, when on North Water Street in Edgartown, Massachusetts, the youngish, straw-haired, dimple-kneed wife of the yacht club commodore, a prominent Brahmin investment banker, was seen brandishing a copy of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* as she uttered to a friend, in tones of clamp-jawed desolation, these words: "My dear, it's going to happen to *all* of us!"

This understatement could not have seemed quite so omniscient to me back then in 1947. At that time the drowsing black behemoth, although beginning to stir, was still not regarded as much of a northern problem. Perhaps for this very reason — although I might honestly have bridled at the intolerant Yankee slurs that had sometimes come my way (even good old Farrell had gotten in a few mildly caustic licks) — I *did* feel at my heart's core a truly burdensome shame over the kinship I was forced to acknowledge with those solidly Anglo-Saxon subhumans who were the torturers of Bobby Weed. Georgia backwoodsmen, denizens as it so happened of that same

piney coast near Brunswick where my savior Artiste had toiled and suffered and died, they had made sixteen-year-old Bobby Weed one of the last and certainly one of the most memorably wiped-out victims of lynch justice the South was to witness. His reputed crime, very much resembling that of Artiste, had been so classic as to take on the outlines of a grotesque cliché: he had ogled, or molested or otherwise interfered with (actual offense never made clear, though falling short of rape) the simpleton daughter, named Lula — another cliché! but true: Lula's weebegone and rabbity face had sulked from the pages of six metropolitan newspapers — of a crossroads storekeeper, who had instigated immediate action by an outraged daddy's appeal to the local rabble.

I had read, only a week before, of the peasantry's medieval vengeance while standing on an uptown Lexington Avenue local, squashed between an enormously fat woman with an S. Klein shopping bag and a small Popsicle-licking Puerto Rican in a busboy's jacket whose gardenia-ripe brilliantine floated sweetishly up to my nose as he mooned over my *Mirror*, sharing with me its devil's photographs. While he was still alive Bobby Weed's cock and balls had been hacked off and thrust into his mouth (this feature not displayed) and when near death, though reportedly aware of all, had by a flaming blowtorch received the brand on his chest of a serpentine "L" — representing what? "Lynch?" "Lula?" "Law and Order?" "Love?" Even as Nathan raved at me, I recalled having semi-staggered out of the train and up into the bright summer light of Eighty-sixth Street, amid the scent of wienerwurst and Orange Julius and scorched metal from the subway gratings, moving blindly past the Rossellini movie I had traveled that far to see. I did not go to the theatre that afternoon. Instead, I found myself at Gracie Square on the promenade by the river, gazing as if in a trance at the municipal hideousness of the river islands, unable to efface the mangled image of Bobby Weed from my mind even as I kept murmuring — endlessly it seemed — lines from *Revelation* I had memorized as a boy: *And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. And there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain.* . . . Perhaps it had been an overreaction, but — ah God, even so, I could not weep.

Nathan's voice, still badgering me, swam back into hearing. "Look, in the *concentration camps* the brutes in charge would not have stooped to *that* bestiality!"

Would they? Would they not? It seemed hardly to matter, and I was sick of the argument, sick of the fanaticism I was unable to counter or find shelter from, sick with the vision of Bobby Weed and — despite feeling no complicity whatever in the Georgia abomination — suddenly sick with a past and a place and a heritage I could neither believe in nor fathom. I had the idle urge now — at risk of a broken nose — to heave the rest of my beer in Nathan's face. Restraining myself, I tensed my shoulders and said in tones of frosty contempt: "As a member of a race which has been unjustly persecuted

for centuries for having allegedly crucified Christ, *you* — yes, *you*, goddamit! — should be aware of how inexcusable it is to condemn any single *people* for *anything*!” And then I found myself so enraged that I blurted out something which to Jews, in that tormented bygone year scant months removed from the crematoriums, was freighted with enough incendiary offensiveness to make me regret the words as soon as they escaped my lips. But I didn’t take them back. “And that goes for *any* people,” I said, “by God, even the Germans!”

Nathan flinched, then reddened even more deeply, and I thought that the showdown had finally arrived. Just then, however, Sophie miraculously salvaged the entire cheerless situation by swooping down in her campus cutup costume and inserting herself between the two of us.

“Stop this talk *right now*!” she demanded. “Stop it! It is too *serious* for Sunday!” There was playfulness in her manner but I could tell she meant business. “Forget Bobby Weed! We must talk about *happy* things! We must go to Coney Island and swim and eat and have a lovely time!” She whirled on the glowering golem and I was surprised and considerably relieved to see how readily she was able to discard her wounded, submissive role and actually stand up to Nathan in a frisky way, beginning to manipulate him out of sheer charm, beauty and *brio*. “What do you know about concentration camps, Nathan Landau? Nothing at all! Quit talking about such places! And quit shouting at Stingo! Quit shouting at Stingo about Bobby Weed! Enough! Stingo didn’t have anything to do with Bobby Weed! Stingo’s *sweet*! And you’re sweet, Nathan Landau, and *vraiment, je t’adore*!”

I noticed that summer that under certain circumstances having to do with the mysterious vicissitudes of his mind and mood, Sophie was able to work upon Nathan such tricks of alchemy that he was almost instantaneously transformed — the ranting ogre become Prince Charming. European women often boss their men, too, but with a beguiling subtlety unknown to most American females. Now she pecked him lightly on the cheek and, holding his outstretched hands by her fingertips, stared at him appraisingly as the beet-hued, choleric passion he had vented on me began to recede from his face.

“*Vraiment, je t’adore, chéri*,” she said softly and then, tugging at his wrists, sang out in the most cheery voice of the day: “To the beach! To the beach! We’ll build *sand castles*!”

And the tempest was over, the thunderclouds had rolled away, and the sunniest good humor flooded into the color-splashed room, where the curtains made a tap-tapping sound upon a sudden gusty breeze from the park. As we moved toward the door, the three of us, Nathan — looking a bit like a fashionable gambler now in his suit out of an old *Vanity Fair* — looped his long arm around my shoulder and offered me an apology so straightforward and honorable that I could not help but forgive him his dark insults, his bigoted and wrongheaded slurs and his other transgressions.

"Old Stingo, I'm just an ass, an *ass*!" he roared in my ear, uncomfortably loud. "I don't *mean* to be a shmuck, it's a bad habit I've got, saying things to people without any regard for their feelings! I know it's not *all* bad down South! Hey, I'll make you a promise! I promise never to jump on you about the South again! O.K.? Sophie, you're the witness!" Squeezing me, towsling my hair with fingers that moved across my scalp as if they were kneading dough and like some overgrown and ludicrously affectionate Schnauzer poking his noble scimitar of a nose into the coral recesses of my ear, he fell into what I began to identify as his comic mode.

We walked in the gayest of spirits toward the subway station — Sophie between us now, her arms linked in ours — and he returned to that grits-and-molasses accent he rendered with such fantastic precision; there was no sarcasm this time, no intent to needle me, and his intonation, accurate enough to fool a native of Memphis or Mobile, caused me to nearly choke with laughter. But his gift was not mimicry alone, what emanated from him so drolly was the product of dazzling invention. With the loutish, swollen, barely comprehensible diction I had heard bubble up out of the tonsils of all sorts of down-home rustics, he embarked on an improvisation so crazily funny and so deadly precise and obscene that in my own hilarity I quite forgot that it all involved those people whom he had been flaying only moments before with un pitying and humorless rage. I'm sure Sophie missed many of the nuances of his act but, affected by the general contagion, joined me in filling Flatbush Avenue with noisy runaway laughter. And all of it, I dimly began to realize, was blessedly purgative of the mean and threatful emotions which had churned up like an evil storm in Sophie's room.

Along a block and a half of the city's thronged, easygoing Sunday street, he created an entire southern Appalachian scenario, a kind of darkling, concupiscent Dogpatch in which Pappy Yokum was transformed into an incestuous old farmer consecrated to romps with a daughter that Nathan — ever medically aware — had christened Pink Eye. "Ever git yore dick sucked by a harelip?" Nathan cackled, too loud, startling a pair of window-shopping Hadassah matrons, who drifted past us with expressions of agony as Nathan sailed blissfully on, doing a job on Mammy. "You done knocked up mah precious baby again!" he boohooed in female plaint, his voice a heavenly facsimile — down to the perfect shading of falsetto — of that of some weak-witted and Godforsaken wife and victim, blighted by wedlock, history and retrograde genes. As impossible to reproduce as the exact quality of a passage of music, Nathan's rollicking, dirty performance — and its power, which I can only barely suggest — had its origins in some transcendent desperation, although I was only beginning to be aware of that. What I *was* aware of, as my wild laughter sprang forth, was that it was a species of genius — and this was something I would wait another twenty years to witness, in the incandescent figuration of Lenny Bruce.

Because it was well past noon, Nathan and Sophie and I decided to

postpone our "gourmet" seafood meal until the evening. To fill the gap we bought beautiful long Kosher frankfurters with sauerkraut and Coca-Colas at a little stand and took them with us to the subway. On the train, which was thronged with beach-famished New Yorkers carrying huge bloated inner tubes and squalling infants, we managed to find a seat where we could loll three abreast and munch at our humble but agreeable fare. Sophie fell to eating her hot dog with truly serious absorption while Nathan unwound from his flight and began to get better acquainted with me over the clamor of the train. He was ingratiating now, inquisitive without being nosey, and I responded easily to the questions. What brought me to Brooklyn? What did I do? What did I live on? He seemed tickled and impressed to learn that I was a writer, and as for my means of support I was about to lapse into my silkiest plantation brogue and say something on the order of: "Well, you see there was this nigger — *Knee-grow* — slave I owned, that was sold. . ." But I thought this might provoke Nathan into thinking I was pulling his leg; he might then embark again upon his monologue, which was becoming a trifle exhausting, so I merely smiled thinly, wrapping myself in an enigma, and replied: "I have a private source of income."

"You're a writer?" he said again, earnestly and with obvious enthusiasm. Shaking his head back and forth as if with the minor marvel of it all, he leaned across Sophie's lap and gripped my arm at the elbow. And I did not feel it at all awkward or emotional when his black, brooding eyes pierced into mine and he told me in a shout: "You know, I think we're going to become great friends!"

"Oh, we're *all* going to become great friends!" Sophie echoed him suddenly. A lovely phosphorescence enveloped her face as we plunged toward sunlight, out of the claustrophobic tunnel and into the marshy maritime reaches of south Brooklyn. Her cheek was very close to my own, flushed with contentment, and when once again she linked her arms in mine and Nathan's I felt on cozy enough terms to remove, between my delicate thumb and forefinger, a tiny thread of sauerkraut clinging to the corner of her lip. "Oh we're going to be the *best* of friends!" she trilled over the train's rackety noise, and she gave my arm a tight squeeze which was certainly not flirtatious but contained something in it more than — well, casual. Call it the reassuring squeeze of one who, secure in her love for another, wished to admit a newfound companion into the privileges of her trust and affection. This was one hell of a compromise, I thought, pondering the harsh inequity of Nathan's custodianship of such an exquisite prize, but better even this savory little crust than no loaf at all. I returned Sophie's squeeze with the clumsy pressure of unrequited love, and realized as I did so that I was so horny my balls had begun to ache. Earlier, Nathan had mentioned getting me a girl at Coney Island, a "hot dish" he knew named Leslie; it was a consolation to be looked forward to, I supposed in the stoic mood of the perpetual runner-up, decorously concealing by means of a languidly

arranged hand the gabardine bulge in my lap. Despite all this frustration, I began to try to convince myself, with partial success, that I was happy; certainly I was happier than I had been in as long as I could remember. Thus I was ready to bide my time and discover what might felicitously happen, see what Sundays like this — entwined amid the other promising days of the onrushing summer — would bring. I drowsed a little. I was set softly aflame by Sophie's nearness, by her bare arm moist against mine, and by some scent she wore — an earthy disturbing perfume vaguely herbal, like thyme. Doubtless some obscure Polish weed. Floating on an absolute tidal wave of desire, I fell into a daydream through which there rushed back sharp flickering impressions of my hapless eavesdrop of the day before. Sophie and Nathan, asprawl on the marigold bedspread. I could not get that image out of my mind. And their words, their raging lovewords showering down!

Then the erotic glow that bathed my daydream faded, vanished, and other words echoed in my ears and caused me to sit up with a start. For at some point yesterday in that pandemonium of frenzied advice and deafening demand, amid the shouts and muffled murmurs and randy exhortations, had I *really* heard from Nathan the words I now so chillingly recalled? No, it was later, I realized, during one moment of what seemed now their unending conflict, that his voice had come down through the ceiling, booming, with the ponderous, measured cadence of booted footfalls, and cried out in a tone that might have been deemed a parody of existential anguish had it not possessed the resonances of complete, unfeigned terror: "Don't . . . you . . . see . . . Sophie . . . we . . . are . . . dying! *Dying!*"

I shivered violently, as if someone had thrown open at my back in the dead of winter a portal on the Arctic wastes. It was nothing so grand as what might be called a premonition — this clammy feeling which overtook me, in which the day darkened swiftly, along with my contentment — but I was suddenly ill-at-ease enough to long desperately to escape, to rush from the train. If, in my anxiety, I had done so, hopping off at the next stop and hurrying back to Yetta Zimmerman's to pack my bags and flee, this would be another story or, rather, there would be no story at all to tell. But I allowed myself to plunge on toward Coney Island, thus making sure to help fulfill Sophie's prophecy about the three of us: that we would become "the best of friends."

Rimbaud Fire Letter to Jim Applewhite

That decade with Rimbaud I don't regret.
But could not live again. Man, that was *hard*.
Nursing the artificial fevers, wet
With Falstaff beer, I walked the railyard,
Stumbled the moon-streaked tracks, reciting line
After burning line I couldn't understand.
In the long twilight I waited for a sign
The world its symbol would mount at my command.

My folks thought I was crazy, maybe I was.
Drinking behind the garbage back of Maxine's Grill,
I formulated esoteric laws
That nothing ever obeyed, or ever will.
"Les brasiers, pleuvant aux rafales de givre. — Douceurs!"
I must have dreamed those words a hundred times,
But what they meant, or even what they *were*,
I never knew. They glowed in my head like flames.

Four things I knew: Rimbaud was genius pure;
The colors of the vowels and verb-tenses;
That civilization was going up in fire;
And how to derange every last one of my senses:
Kind of a handbook on how to be weird and silly.
It might have helped if I had known some French,
But like any other Haywood County hillbilly
The simple thought of the language made me flinch.

So passed my high school years. The senior prom
I missed, and the girls, and all the thrilling sports.
My teacher asked me, "Boy, where you *from*?"
"From deep in a savage forest of unknown words."
The dialogue went downhill after that,
But our positions were clear respectively:
They stood up for health and truth and light,
I stood up for Baudelaire and me.

The subject gets more and more embarrassing.
 Should I mention the clumsy shrine I built
 In the maple tree behind old Plemmons' spring?
 Or how I played the young Artur to the hilt
 In beer joints where the acrid farmers drank?
 Or how I tried to make my eyes look *through*?
 —I'd better not. Enough, that I stayed drunk
 For eight hot years, and came up black and blue.

One trouble was that time was running out.
 Rimbaud had finished "all that shit" before
 He reached his nineteenth year. I had about
 Nineteen short months to get down to the core.
 I never did, of course. I wrote a bunch
 Of junk I'm grateful to have burned; I read
 Some books. But my courage was totally out to lunch.
 Oh, Fred Fred Fred Fred Fred . . .

Remember when we met our freshman year?
 Not something you'd want to repeat, I guess, for still
 R. worked his will in me, a blue blear
 Smoke poured forth. (That, and alcohol.)
 (And an army of cranky opinions about whatever
 Topic was brought up.) (And a hateful pose
 Of expertise.) Jesus, was I clever!
 And smelt myself as smelling like a rose.

I had a wish, "Mourir aux fleuves barbares,"
 And to fulfill it could have stayed at home.
 But down at Duke in 1954
 (*I like Ike*) it carried weight with some
 Few wild men and true who wanted to write
 And even tried to write — God bless them
 Everyone! — and who scheduled the night
 For BEER and the explication of a POEM.

Well, you recall: Mayola's Chili House,
 Annamaria's Pizza, Maitland's Top Hat,
 The Pickwick, and that truly squalid place,
 The Duchess, where the local whores stayed fat
 On college boys, and the Blue Star, the I.
 P.D. But the joint that really made us flip
 Sat sunsoaked on Broad St., where we walked by
Rambeau's Barber Shop.

Those were the days!. . . — But they went on and on and on.
 The failure I saw myself grew darker and darker.
 And because of the heated persuasion of Bob Mirandon
 I got Rimbaud confused with Charlie Parker.
 It was a mess, mon vieux. Finally
 They kicked me out, and back to the hills I went.
 But not before they'd taught me how to see
 Myself as halfway halved and halfway blent.

Jim, we talked our heads off. What didn't we say?
 We didn't say what it cost our women to prop
 Our psyches up, we couldn't admit *the day*
And age belonged still to our fathers. One drop
 Distillate of Carolina reality
 Might have cured much, but they couldn't make us drink.
 We kept on terribly seeing how to see,
 We kept on terribly thinking how to think.

They turned me down for the Army. I wanted it raw,
 I wanted to find a wound my mother could love.
 ("Il a deux trous rouges au côté droit.")
 I wanted Uncle Sugar to call my bluff. . .
 No soap. I wound up hauling fertilizer,
 Collecting bills, and trying to read Rimbaud
 At night, and preaching those poems to David Deas or
 Anyone else I thought might care to know.

The only good thing was that I got married.
 And I watched the mountains until the mountains touched
 My mind and partly tore away my fire-red
 Vision of a universe besmirched.
 I started my Concordance to Samuel Johnson,
 And learned to list a proper footnote, got down
 To reading folks like Pope and Bertrand Bronson,
 And turned my back on the ashes of Pareee-town.

But as my father said, "Fire's in the bloodstream."
 The groaning it cost my muse to take off my edge
 Still sounds in my sleep, rasps my furious dream.
 — Tell you what, Jim: let's grow old and sage,
 Let's don't wind up brilliant, young, and dead.
 Let's just remember.

— Give my love to Jan.

Yours for terror and symbolism,

ole Fred.

28 May 1971

Notes on Contributors

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Fred Chappell edited *The Archive* as an undergraduate at Duke. The author of four novels and two books of poetry, he is writer-in-residence at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. "Rimbaud Fire Letter" will appear in *Bloodfire*, a forthcoming collection.

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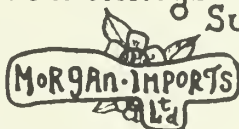
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THE ARCHIVE



fall '77

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Southern Afternoon

The heat shut down on the good red bottomland, as I bounced along in the back of the pickup with dust in my eyes. Off the highway now we were under the trees where it was cooler. We drove on by the frog pond whose surface was a film of dry September. We came to a stop in front of the big house with its doors standing open. Inside it was dark and quiet, and it smelled like the time when the family grows old and the people move away and the floors dry out and little weevils get under the wallpaper and eat the paste. Walking through the high old rooms I found a lantern and a chair with the bottom out, though I was five at the time, and didn't know that the real purpose of the trip was to steal great granddaddy John's rolltop desk and chair where he made the fortune from under the noses of my great aunts (but especially Flossie) who he gave it all to. This summer I was looking through one of his account books, of what he had sold to whom, and how he would drain the low lands on the Catawba for corn, and I found this:

"Never drink whiskey with oysters or eat ice cream
with soft shell crabs, or sweets much with either."

I carry it written on paper in my wallet, but I don't carry it next to my money. I carry my money next to it.

— John Ray



Mountains

When the bells rang the brightly colored lines of children snaked across the playground and into the building, winding through the dimly lit hallways, into the classrooms. After the doors had closed and the class monitors had put their yellow safety flags, which they waved so proudly at street crossings, away in the flag rack at the top of the stairs they, too, entered their classrooms. Then there were no more bells and the shrill laughter of the children was silent. The building almost seemed deserted, although it was now at its busiest. Somewhere in the bowels of the basement pipes clanked, sending a sad sort of shiver up through the walls.

The child stood alone near the top of the stairway looking down the narrow corridor at the rows of closed doors and at the line of fallow light-bulbs hanging from the ceiling, each encased in its own small metal grating. On the wall to one side was a plastic map of the world. The mountains, which were formed from the raised plastic, had been smashed in by some belligerent fingers when a line of children had passed once too often through this hallway. Part of the plastic that had been the Alps had been torn off. He walked over to the map and traced the outline of France with his finger. He had been there. There was Germany; he had been there, too. Italy and Spain and England and Austria. He looked for Switzerland; eager to find the spot on the plastic that had been his home for so many years. But Switzerland was not on the map — it had been torn away with the Alps. Anyway, he lived in Cleveland now.

He had lived with his parents and his grandmother (actually she was his father's grandmother, though she'd never admit to such great age) high on a snow capped mountain. His parents were often away; they both worked for the United States State Department and travelled frequently. He always loved being alone with his grandmother. The two of them would sit at the picture window looking at the skiers coming from all over Europe, they would look at the sun shining through the mountain passes. Mr. Thornbar, his tutor, came every day except Sundays. When the snow was very high he would stay with them for days at a time, and sometimes they would go down the mountain together to the village where everything wasn't bright and white but rather green instead. The sun, though, was everywhere. When their five hours of lessons were finished they and his grandmother would all drink coffee with heavy cream. Sometimes his grandmother would stay inside at the window while he and Mr. Thornbar went out on the mountain and had a snow fight.

It seemed a long time ago and far removed from this dark hallway in this musty red-brick school that he had ever stood in the sun on the Alps. He moved away from the map and regarded the rows of closed doors solemnly. Which one was his? There — it was that one, that one at the end. Should he go in or should he take a deep breath and run?

The distance wasn't really too far to run; he could be back in the new apartment — safe — in ten minutes. He would sit at the kitchen table and tell

his grandmother how he couldn't, no, how he just *wouldn't* stay all day in so dark a place. Surely he wouldn't be made to return. And maybe they could get Mr. Thornbar to come to Cleveland and be his teacher again.

He leaned against the map to think. He brushed his pale hair out of his eyes and blew upward at a lock that fell back across his forehead. He began picking at the plastic map, and spent a long time peeling away part of the Rocky Mountains. More mountains.

The door to the classroom at the end of the hall opened abruptly and before he could jump away from the map and run down the stairs and away, a brown-haired young woman stepped out of the room, into the corridor, and saw him. She called out his name and said, "You're the new boy that the principal sent to our class, aren't you?" She was smiling and motioning for him to come toward her.

There was still time; he could get away if he left now, and quickly. There had been more time before, oh, why had he played so long with the map on the wall? Part of the plastic was still in his hand. He clutched it tightly as he walked to the smiling young woman and bleakly followed her into the classroom.

Rows and rows of curious faces all turned to him as the teacher led him to a seat near the back of the room by the windows. A dreadful anxiety settled over him as the brown-haired teacher handed him some new books with bright covers and showed him where to put them in his desk. She said that everyone was so glad to have him as part of the class, and here were some sharp number two pencils and a pink eraser for him to keep. He must not write in the new books, though. She explained that, a little bit later, after the class had finished adding fractions, they would all see a film strip showing how to grow lima beans in a jar.

Oh, where are you, Mr. Thornbar?

He looked out the window and it was raining in Cleveland.

—Kathryn L. Reiss

A Letter to My Wife from the Ruins of St. Cyprein

White seeds still rest upon thorns,
 A large yacht at anchor nods yes to the sea.
 Make no mistake, the time marks for travel,
 We know the stars as the palm of our hand
 There will be no error when the sails are full.
 All things converge upon this point; rest for a moment
 Before the imagination —
 Everything is possible though there be no further movement.
 Then a swallow cracks the sky; I rise from the temple.
 All things begin to move —
 You soon will cross, leave behind our home and be with me.
 We will surround ourselves with sea-urchins, cuttle-fish
 And a triton-shell shall be our horn, sounding love
 Beyond the sparrow and dove —
 Now the sun dial's shadow falls upon this time
 When the faith is not blind but a way of knowing.

— Elon G. Eidenier



Bird, He Was Brought Low

The bleak chill of a winter's day, the humid smokey air within, a layer of fog covering the long windows of the train. Karena left the crowded tobacco-smelling compartment and went to the buffet car. "What would you like, miss?" Like? What would she like? She would like to sit in the empty buffet car and in the hour and twenty minutes separating Oxford and London, separating the car in which she sat and a certain track at Paddington station, construct some sort of coherent connection between her own life and the life of another, a virtual stranger, the single reason for her journey, someone who for all she knew may not even await her at the journey's end. "Tea, I think."

She leaned against the trembling wall of the train and cleared a patch of the foggy glass. Her mind at present: fog. "You think?" grinned the snack bar attendant from behind his counter opposite her. Sounded like her father: one must be certain, Karena, and failing that, one must at least give the appearance of certainty. "You think milk and sugar as well?" Hard as she might try, she could not, especially not of late, be certain of anything. His daughter's failing. "Twelve pence, miss." She walked three shaky steps to the counter, set down the coins, and picked up the cup, its steaming liquid burning her hand, the same hand held the night before for a brief second by an unknown actor standing like a shadow at the stage door of an old theater, begging her to meet him today . . .

This behavior, this course of action, this choice she had made unthinkingly when confronted with a decision — would she, upon arriving and searching the crowds and possibly not finding him and having to make an inconceivably desolate trip back to Oxford, regret it at some later point? "Look sharp now . . . if you stand there any longer daydreaming, it'll all spill."

Look sharp. Look sharp, again he sounded like her father, annoyed by her tendency to drift off in the middle of a serious conversation. No, not her father so much, her father just snapped "Karena" impatiently. More like Randy, it was Randy who said look sharp, better natured than her father, same eagerness to demonstrate a steely, analytical mind, both thickly bearded, but Randy was captivating, witty, a little gentler. Karena amused Randy, even the afternoon they met her first week at Oxford.

"Say, Kerrie love," he exclaimed with vigor as they wandered through the university town at dusk, "what are you going to do with your life once you get a Ph.D. from this place? Go back to America and teach?"

"God no, I'd be swallowed up by my students. What about you?"

"Teach, of course. What else do you do with a doctorate in history? Seriously, though, don't you have any practical ideas about a career?"

"None. Randy, look!" She pulled him towards the lighted entrance to one of the colleges. "Will you look at those people trying to play croquet in the dark?" Electric lanterns at each doorway around the college quadrangle cast a dim glow on the green where a dozen students bent over their game. From

someone's window came a symphony recording punctuated by the clacking of croquet mallets and the slow subdued chatter of the players.

"What's the point of spending years in graduate school five thousand miles from home to get a degree you won't even use?"

"Just to have it. One professor in the family is enough."

"Who?"

"Father. Comparative government. Columbia University."

"Columbia, you say? Teraben . . . Douglas Teraben?"

"That's correct."

"Didn't he write a scathing article in *Foreign Affairs* awhile ago that inspired masses of enraged commentary?"

"Mm-hmm. Not masses, though. And more annoyed than enraged."

"I may have read a book of his as an undergraduate . . . *Implications of Radical Activity* or something?"

"Shh . . . you'll disturb the game."

"Yes, I'm certain I read it. Don't know how much sense your old man made in the end but his argument is extremely impressive. Do you agree with your father?"

"I haven't read it. Do you think that's Brahms?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. You didn't even read your own father's book?"

"It's boring."

He shook his head. "You're extraordinary. I think there's a pub just down the road from here. Why don't we go for a drink and you can explain your thesis topic to me?"

"Not until the croquet game is over," she insisted. "Let's not talk until then. Anyway, I don't have a thesis topic yet." There was the pacifying tap of the mallets and balls, too dark to see much, only hear their faint and distinct tapping, strains of the music, maybe Brahms, a struggle to finish the game before night took over; night would put a halt to their playing.

"Teraben's daughter . . . extraordinary. Hard to imagine him as a family man. He must be a pretty tough cookie."

A pretty tough cookie. Apt description. Tried to make her one, too, something of an informal yet intense game between father and daughter. Sometimes he won, sometimes he lost, last time Douglas Teraben had won. *Summa cum laude*, salutorian, the best graduate schools all wanting her: his dream, maybe hers, she had been too deeply entrenched in the process to have really known.

And what an ugly process it had been. The ceaseless explaining of herself on application form essays, to deans, fellowship advisors, wardens of this, officers of that, all attempting to find her out, what she knew, did not know, had done and intended to do. That unrelenting process her father subjected her to of intellectual assessment. Define her terms. State her goals. Demonstrate her comprehension. Formulate her thesis. At this procedure she had become so expert that the positive responses from six of the six graduate schools she had applied to did not surprise her.

Yes, he had won, but in the end she fooled him by going as far away as she

could, by choosing Oxford for no reason in particular, except that it was distant and old and a mystery to her. Douglas didn't understand mystery so she deserted him, left him banging relentlessly away at his typewriter in his SoHo apartment, pontificating energetically to his students at Columbia, debating fervently with his colleagues, a man with absolutely no concept of levity or leisure. Even his ready humor was devoid of mirth. Bitterly satirical, pointed, intentional. Except once. Once when she was eight before her parents were divorced while they still had a home in suburban Connecticut.

She was playing jacks in the driveway while waiting for her father to return from work. He drove an Audi to the station daily, took a commuter train into New York, returned at irregular hours bearing books and papers and talking loudly to a companion of some sort who would stay until late. That afternoon he turned into the driveway laughing heartily behind the wheel with a student beside him and, catching sight of Karena, rolled down the window and shouted, "This is my daughter Kerrie. Let's run her over and make her into a pancake!" The driveway was wide, the car small, Karena perched near the edge. Plenty of room to pass but her father steered the car in her direction. "No, Daddy," she shrieked, "I'm here!" The two in the car laughed harder. "We see you . . . Kerrie Pancake! Kerrie Pancake!" Before she could spring to her feet, the fender loomed frightfully close. "Daddy, stop!" The engine sputtered on, Karena threw herself back onto the grass, rolled over and stood up. Still shaking, she looked at him questioningly.

Her father did not tease, did not play games with her, perpetually insisted she was too old for the pastimes in which her mother privately let her indulge, jacks, television, trolls, coloring books. If the jacks angered him, why did he threaten to run her over with laughter on his face, making a game of the punishment for her own game?

She hadn't understood the incident at the age of eight, she did not understand it now. To have recalled it in all its vivid, mystifying terror three months ago upon meeting Randy Novak upset her. To still feel a trace of terror while navigating a cup of tea back to her seat in the buffet car of a rocking train made no sense at all. Hence the incident must be forgotten. Disturbing events either trivial or irrelevant in nature her father had trained her to forget. No, he had not trained her. He had tried to train her but she had failed, had not the will to put the past out of her mind and concentrate solely on the future. Not like Ulrike, her father's second wife, a woman who had known some mysterious suffering as a child in Austria, something related to World War II, terrible and unspeakable and firmly put from her mind.

Strong, rational woman, Ulrike, from a distinguished Viennese family, lost everything because of the War and she, the only surviving member, determined to regain it now in New York. She had done well and she wallowed in her success, enjoyed being good to Karena, inviting her to lunch, to shop, to galleries while Karena was an undergraduate at Columbia. Always leaving messages at her dormitory to call her office, forcing Karena to deal with her protective secretary . . . Miss Haas was in conference at present, she could not be disturbed, who was this please, Karena Teraben? She had a message for Miss Teraben, would she please come to Miss Haas' office at 7:00 if she cared to have dinner with her? She would? Very fine, she

would relay the message to Miss Haas. Smooth icy voice, that secretary, well suited to her boss, to the company, to the building in which she worked.

Karena loathed the building, a monstrous white marble structure lording pompously over the street. And to go there after hours admitted by a uniformed guard demanding her signature and the nature of her business, compelled to walk through a cavernous marble lobby past bays and bays of elevators, their positions marked by glowing, bouncing numbers on gold plates, her footsteps resounding, could hell be cold and white? To be sucked upward in a shaking sealed cubicle daily, only the most composed and iron-willed would tolerate. Ulrike. The elevator opened onto the sixty-first floor, the lavishly decorated offices of a cosmetic company over which Ulrike presided. She was not the president, however from her the vital ideas and energy emanated. Quietly, firmly, she ruled, an acknowledged and welcomed usurper of the ineffectual president's authority.

"Ah, Karena! I'm so pleased you decided to come," said Ulrike, her modulated speech bearing the refined remnants of an Austrian accent. "I discovered a wonderful restaurant the other day, a quiet little place, rather French, salads and such, nothing for Douglas but I thought you'd enjoy it. You're dressed a bit casually, aren't you? I was hoping perhaps you'd change. It's an elegant place, not dressy but . . . ah well, you're a student. They all dress that way."

No, they didn't all dress that way; Karena dressed that way, without style or sophistication. Fashionless. In spite of her efforts since Douglas married Ulrike three years earlier, Karena had no understanding of fashion whatsoever. Her mother, a weak pedestrian-minded woman, now a legal secretary in San Diego escaping her pressured past life in the East, had had no flair for fashion either. Seated across from Ulrike at a streetside table in the restaurant pushing around a crab salad, she felt completely misplaced, a ragged dull rock juxtaposing a glistening polished jade. A beautiful woman her father had chosen, one tall and willowy with hair styled in thick relaxed waves. Her clothes, always of pure expensive fabrics, silk, wool, linen, drifted about her when she walked, yards and yards of exquisitely printed cloth shaped by a few well-positioned dressmaker's stitches letting the entire garment fall easily into place.

"You don't eat. Are you upset?"

"I got my paper back from Langstrom. He thought my idea was absurd."

"Ah, forget him, forget the paper, forget school altogether for awhile. You worry about it too much. I disagree with all the pressure Douglas puts on you to do well. You have no social life and so you devote yourself to examinations and papers. What you need is a lover."

Karena coughed on the vinegar salad dressing. A lover. Lu-vah. Ulrike's mauve lips formed the word in two whispy syllables. Lu-vah.

"Lu-vah," echoed Karena into her teacup, as if Ulrike were sitting across from her right then in the empty buffet uttering the words afresh.

"What's that miss? Did you say something?"

Karena flushed. "No, no, just thinking aloud," she told the snack bar attendant. Talking to herself in public, unreasonable behavior, dredging up a past rendered more and more irrelevant with each beat of the train towards

Paddington, with each day that passed since catching a crowded train last week at Greenwich after an afternoon concert . . .

Dismal ride Greenwich to Waterloo, especially at the rush hour, especially in a cold rain. A man and a small boy followed her onto the rattling 6:00 city-bound train and settled themselves opposite her in the compartment. Two long lines of seats, six people across, nine propped up newspapers, eighteen hands, and then the three of them, forming an island by the window high above a suburban maze of chimneys, lines of limp laundry, council housing gardens littered with broken toys, factories beyond the homes billowing smoke.

Karena and the man grinned vaguely at each other in recognition of their mutual condition. His shy nervous grin of one who feels badly out of place reminded her of someone — an old man wandering slowly through a crowded supermarket, a dancer out of step, a girl crying over a dead pigeon . . . no, not that . . . just someone she had noticed simply for being misplaced. The man, carelessly dressed, worn, ill at ease, filled her with sadness. Not pity for he was altogether handsome and finely built, but sadness for it was as if his beauty and power had been distorted, bottled up inside, the result of denying something so elemental within himself that his life had begun to work against him. And yet he did not seem defeated, no, not a pigeon caught under a taxi wheel. A still viable will caused him to sit upright, a will contained in the arm he put protectively and proudly around the boy. The boy, his son — in him the man's will lived. Yes. She understood. The boy.

And in her, in what did her will live?

She, like the man, was essentially a misfit in her own life, a person too used to doing what was not instinctive to even know what was instinctive. When a person sharpens a blunt knife till it cuts like a razor, he naturally considers his knife sharp, not dull. So it was with Douglas in considering Karena. By nature she was imprecise, a lover of the vague impression created by the strains of a child's piano lesson filtering out onto the street, the steam on a bathroom mirror, a painting hidden in a dark corner of a museum . . .

When the train made a lengthy stop at Deptford, a corpulent woman weighted down by two bulging sacks of groceries entered the compartment and wedged herself in between the little boy and another passenger. The boy eyed the groceries, eyed the woman, turned to his father who absently ran his fingers through the boy's pale hair and opened a battered black notebook in his lap. Discouraged, the boy turned to the woman.

"You've got lots of nice things for tea, haven't you?" he declared.

"Yes, for my children," answered the woman. "I'm sure your mother has a lovely tea waiting for you as well."

"No missus. My mum isn't home. She's left us."

As if awaiting a reprimand, the people in the unbearably quiet compartment lowered their newspapers and looked at the father.

"Enough, Davey," he murmured finally.

Mercifully the train began to creak out of Deptford. Still the people watched the father. He studied the passing scenery, stared at the floor, leafed

through the notebook. Then he lifted his face, ashen and tired, and looked deliberately at Karena: yes, she had seen him before, felt his confusion, but helpless, she could only return an equally confused gaze.

Waterloo. The train hardly slowed before the father rose from his seat, picked the child up and pulled the door open with a violent yank. He jumped from the moving train and disappeared by the time it came to a halt, leaving on the floor beneath his seat the black notebook. The people stared at it. Impulsively Karena reached forward but then pulled back. The stares had shifted to her. Pigeon. The pigeon. A wave of revulsion passed through her.

The black pigeon in New York just before she had left for England at the 59th Street entrance to Central Park, a black pigeon beaten against the asphalt, abandoned and ridiculed like the black notebook and everybody staring at her, not at the pigeon, not at the notebook. Ulrike and Douglas and Karena enroute to Lincoln Center for an opera, Ulrike's black chiffon dress fluttering as she moved, Douglas' clipped beard bobbing with rapid speech, she, walking gracelessly alongside; they stopped at the entrance to the park, waited for the light to halt a stream of traffic, watched monstrous yellow taxis race by, her father talking all the while, talking even as a taxi rushed headlong into a flapping flock of pigeons that scattered instantly, flew away, all but one, she could hear it now . . . the quick sharp swoop of the bird too low, the scrambling of wings, the careless slap of the taxi's wheel, her father's continuous voice. She tried to scream.

And then she could feel it. Douglas' hand slapping over her mouth to stifle the ugly sound, Ulrike grasping her shoulders with piercing raisin-colored nails, her father pulling her against his corduroy jacket, an Italian ice seller laughing unabashedly, his laughter joined by a dusty hackney driver and a circle of pedestrians, their attention all drawn to the aborted sobs of an awkward young woman and her embarrassed parents, the pigeon remaining as more cars whipped over its body . . .

A few people in the compartment rose to leave, their feet treading over the notebook, kicking it further under the seat. Karena rushed between them, opened her mouth to cry out and then suddenly stopped as if a silencing slap had been delivered across her face. The people froze around her and waited. In a single self-condemning movement she stooped clumsily to their feet, grabbed the now-filthy notebook and fled the compartment, freeing herself of its terrible tension.

She could have done nothing with the notebook, a play script. Ignored the name scribbled in pencil on the first page. But there was only one Simon Holmescarr in the London telephone directory.

On a table inside the sunny vestibule of a brick rowhouse were three piles of letters. Farnsworth, Flat A. Kahn, Flat B. Holmescarr, Flat C. She could have left it on the table.

She opened the glass door and climbed the long narrow stairway smelling of mildewed carpet and cooking oil. At the top was a warped door marked by a handwritten nameplate. She reached up, rested a hand on the brass knocker, and for a long time read the nameplate. Finally, giving the knocker a faint tap, she propped the script against the door and started quickly away. A

second later the door opened.

"Hello . . . did you want . . ." Upon seeing her face, the man's voice trailed off.

"You left it on the train."

He nodded and fingered the script. "I hope you didn't go out of your way."

"That's all right." There was silence.

"When does the play open?"

"Next week."

"Soon then."

"Yes, very soon." Again, a long pause. He knit his brow as if in pain. "Perhaps you'll come to see it?" he asked apprehensively.

"No," responded Karena.

"I can't . . ." she added at once, sensing the depth of the hurt a single word had inflicted. "I'm supposed to leave for Edinburgh." Edinburgh, yes, she and Randy were going to Edinburgh for a long weekend, to Edinburgh before the term began, Edinburgh, decided one night in his room.

"We'll go to Edinburgh and do something about your condition."

"What condition?"

"You know."

Of course she knew what condition. The condition which caused her that time he succeeded in getting her into bed to freeze like a corpse, her eyes squeezed shut against his satisfied grin and inquisitive tensor lamp above the bed. But her stiffening, an involuntary reflex, had not come from fear or inhibition; fear or inhibition, Randy would have understood, loved even and handled with authoritative tenderness. No, fear hadn't seized her at all. Laughter had — helpless, unpredicted, uncontrollable laughter, aroused by the absurdity of seeing Randy's face hovering over her, lamp above him, like a surgeon examining an anesthetized patient about to be sliced open but oblivious to the process. And then to aggravate the giggle, she suddenly remembered waking very early one morning on a YWCA camping trip to the sound of muffled voices and snapping twigs coming from a squirming sleeping bag beside her. Maybe she was twelve at the time, as old as thirteen, but she hadn't guessed what the scene implied, and in fact, thought nothing of it until that very moment years later in bed with Randy when she burst out laughing and rolled off the low mattress onto the floor, leaving Randy in a baffled fury.

"We'll go to Edinburgh and try again before the Christmas holiday ends," he announced the following day.

"Okay."

"Don't jump up and down with ecstasy . . . there's nothing humorous about a man confirming his love for a beautiful woman." Loved and beautiful, loved and beautiful in the eyes of a witty and captivating beholder, when in twenty-two years had she felt loved and beautiful? Simon searched her face intently as if not accepting her remark, as if waiting for her to change her mind.

"A pity," he said at last. She started down the steps. "I can have a ticket put aside for you." She halted, considered his statement, and then fled.

She was on a train. It was night and, being black outside, the windows showed only the reflection of the passengers in the compartment of the London-bound train. As it neared Paddington station beneath a line of yellow lamps, Karena could see that the rain had turned to sleet. Not cold enough for a real snow, dry and decisive; just a noncommittal, penetrating dampness. She hurried from the main station to the underground. "Waterloo," she said pushing coins across the ticket counter.

Waterloo bewildered her. Amid a dozen signs directing her to taxis, buffets, toilets, bars, lockers, a mere exit sign appeared nonexistent. Panicking as time grew short, she at last made her way out onto the street and was shocked by the dinginess of the neighborhood. Nevertheless, down the main road — an ugly path of locked storefronts and warmly lit orange pubs — stood a tall, clean-painted theater, swarming with people and bathed in lights. Nearing it, she joined a trail of overdressed theatergoers and listened to the raised monologue of a woman disdainfully sweeping her long dress away from dirty brick walls as she talked busily of this review or that production, all names which were to Karena a foreign language. At the theater she waded through a cushion of people to the box office.

"A . . . uh . . . ticket was left on reserve for me."

"Name?"

"Teraben."

"None for Teraben?"

"None for Teraben?" she cried in dismay. Perhaps he had forgotten. Perhaps he had taken her silent hesitation to mean she would not come. No, neither was true. He simply did not know her name. How odd. He did not even know her name.

"Uh . . . Holmescarr. Is there one for Holmescarr?"

"Yes, indeed. A guest ticket." She took it from him in relief.

Photos of the play lined the passageway to the auditorium. Only after close examination did she locate one of Simon Holmescarr, resembling someone like him, self-contained and self-conscious, rather than he himself. The photo made her uneasy.

She bought a program from an usher in the aisle and at her seat thumbed through it until she came to his name listed towards the bottom of the column headed "In Order of Appearance." At the back were brief biographies of the cast; his career, like the conversation of the woman in the long dress, read like a foreign language.

She observed the slanted stage looming in front of her: there being no curtain, the ambiguously spare set stood idly in view, instantly assuming a specific location and function as soon as the house lights dimmed and the stage lights rose — a transition so quick and subtle that Karena hardly noticed it had happened. Riding the surface of the play, half oblivious to the movement of the characters and the progression of the plot, she ceased to pay attention after the first few minutes. Her mind dwelled on trivial things . . . Randy's list of instructions concerning their trip to Edinburgh, the static of a radio quiz program as she mounted three flights of steps bearing Simon's script, the sound of his voice from the landing . . . his voice, yes, his

voice with its distinctive, meditative quality, tired and almost resigning: hearing it again all of a sudden stirred her from her reverie for, like the photo of Simon in the passageway, it resembled someone like him, rather than he himself. Yet its tone, its rhythm, although artificial and mannered, belonged unmistakably to him. She studied the group of actors on stage, so close they seemed like giants, but could not locate him.

His voice had come from offstage through a door, apparently, a heavy metal one with guards on either side and a small barred window. Unclear of the plot, she had no idea why he was imprisoned. A guard opened the door and he emerged from a black cell as if pushed from behind, stumbling forward into a ring of other characters, disoriented, dishevelled, blinking his eyes unaccustomed to light and brushing the hair from his eyes. A woman helped him to a bench and stood beside him until the ring of people broke up and left the stage, leaving the two alone. Their conversation, accented by measured rises and falls and studied gestures, built to a climax and fell.

Simon slumped on the bench, put his head in his hands and, after an audible sigh, launched into a lengthy speech to the woman. Delivering the verse with practised, breathy control, which nonetheless possessed the same sort of meditative resigning quality it had had when he had spoken to Karena a week ago, he gradually lifted his head and directed the monologue to the audience, though clearly it was meant for the woman. Then, rising slowly, he moved downstage and squinted his eyes, visibly distracted by something ahead of him. His voice faltered, then faded. In the silence, his gaze became a blank stare, his pause not a lapse of memory or an intentional dramatic gesture, but an unwillingness to continue, a lack of conviction in the scene he had to perform. The audience rustled programs, stifled coughs, and waited for him to resume; for them, the few seconds of stillness lasted an eternity and dealt an irrevocable blow to the fragile composition of the play. Their sympathy turned against him for he had forced his viewers to regard him as someone removed from the context of the play, an intolerable disruption. Eventually he began speaking again, but now it was different, it was with a peculiar urgency as if trying to compensate for lost time. Spittle flew from his mouth drawn into exaggerated shapes as it formed the words, his hands beneath the open cuffs of a white shirt were clenched and reddened, his body was contorted in pain, or maybe passion, or perhaps rage; long out of touch with the woman sharing the scene, he conveyed an intensity that was glaringly out of place. Something was terribly wrong with his performance and its very irrelevance to the rest of the play grew and grew as he neared the end of the speech. Its meaning obscured by his nearly hysterical delivery, the final line resounded throughout the theater as little more than an unintelligible cry.

She could not remember what happened after that. Somehow she ended up waiting at a dilapidated stage door in the rain, having asked the first person to come out if Simon Holmescarr was backstage. "Probably," muttered a young girl in paint-splashed jeans. "You want him?"

"Yes." The girl disappeared.

Almost immediately the door opened and Simon stood there breathlessly,

his fatigued face wiped clean of makeup. "Then you did come, after all," he said extending his hand. His slight smile belied shyness. "Don't stand in the rain." He pushed the door open widely and stepped aside so that she could enter. It was very old backstage, drafty and poorly lit and everywhere there was movement and noise and people hurrying about with a casual, preoccupied busyness. Simon led her to a corner.

"Simon!" A man standing in a doorway down the hall called to him. "Notes."

"In a minute."

"No, now. Herb's in the Green Room. He's got a long list of notes for you."

"In a minute, I said," Simon snapped. The man shrugged and left. He addressed Karena. "Maybe . . . maybe we could meet sometime for a drink."

"Yes, that would be fine."

"When?"

"Whenever you like."

"Tomorrow?" She nodded. "In the afternoon? I could meet you someplace. We could have a meal, if you like."

"All right. I'll be coming in from Oxford."

"Oxford?" He bit his lip anxiously. "Does it suit you, then, to meet me in London? Can you manage? Shall I meet you at the station?"

"Simon — *now!* Herb's waiting . . . wants to know what the hell happened to you in the prison scene."

"If you want to, it's not necessary."

"What train will you be on?"

She tried to recall the schedule. "I think there's one that gets in at 3:15."

"Simon!"

Again he extended his hand. She took it, clasping it tightly for a few seconds and then released him.

The train pulled into Paddington on track seven, a cup of cold untouched tea before her sloshed when the train jerked to a halt. "London, love. End of the line. You didn't drink your tea." End of the line, yes, the man was right, it was all over now, people were leaving the train and she must go too, too late to undo what she had done.

She could backtrack maybe, let the train carry her back to Oxford, run to Randy's room, interrupt him at his typewriter, apologize, hear him forgive her, his loved and beautiful woman, have him quiz her in search of a reason for her bizarre behavior, show her his compassionate, rational temperament. And embrace her tightly, let her cry a little, not hysterically but a healthy, restorative, brief cry on his shoulder, his beard scratching her cheek, her father's beard, maybe softer, encircled within his strong grasp, strong like her father's, strong, but wait — she had wrenched free of him, her father, that time in Central Park, wrenched free and stumbled off the curb towards the bird, dead, everyone staring, wanting to scream, stumbling down the steps off the train towards Simon, everyone staring, a scream welling up inside but silenced, her sorrow for the bird silenced, and now for Simon standing there not black and dead but holding fresh flowers, all colors . . .

Karena ran to him, a cry welling up inside of her like Simon's cry on stage

last night, an answer to him, hysteria seemingly out of place to anyone observing the scene, no one to stop her or silence her, she released it —
"Simon!"

But Simon did not seem to know her, stood there wordlessly. Suddenly a terror seized her which brought forth uncontrollable sobs, a terror that did not subside until he pulled her to him, closing his mouth over hers, drawing from her the unsureness, the anguish, the failure.

— Susan Lieberman



A Suite for Graduation

I.

(con terrore)

Between sleep and waking
 I hesitate
 and drink
 the hour
 the minute
 gray cool cup of morning
 sour as my dirty sheets.
 I drink
 knowing they are last dregs
 try to savor
 and instead hallucinate pages of print
 I am supposed to know.
 I suck draughts
 of this particular time and space
 desperate not to love my immobility
 too much
 (what if it stuck
 like crossed eyes?):

uomini fummo
 ed or siamo fatti sterpi

God
 I have been here too long.

I drank last night
 filled my head
 with briney memories
 and doubt.

Io non Aenea
 io non Paulo sono.

I saw the Poet
 strutting on the stage of my brain
 drenched with electric spangles —
 Dante Alighieri and the terzinas
 pumping rhythm
 chanting decasyllabic systole
 hendecasyllabic diastole
 like one of those AM radio lyrics

harder than athlete's foot to lose
 once you've heard it
 the tercets stick in my head
 and turn, revolve, repeat.

Io non Aenea . . .

My Virgils
 my brave teachers
 have arranged
 to be absent
 fled to their private limbo
 of guest lectures
 somewhere else
 afraid

as I am
 of parents
 come to scourge their sinful offspring
 with misunderstanding
 come in Cadillacs
 to see their sons and daughters
 matriculate in sin.
 They have brought their
 raucous voices
 all the way from Long Island and Northern New Jersey
 from inside the walls of Dis
 to commemorate the occasion.
 Like shiny blue-black grackles
 they spar and peck and cackle.

Lord
 My parents
 are coming
 coming from far away.
 I see them in my stupor
 packing suitcases
 my mother's face bright and painful
 with wanting to be here
 saving all the tears
 hoarding her salt
 for me
 my father resigned
 agreeably turned to stone
 a stoic effigy
 they are coming
 to claim me

to touch their flesh
 their made thing.
 I am it
 I think
 and form the words
 on my lips:
 'I am it'
 and am suddenly wide-awake
 sit up panting
 like that were my full range of motion
 frozen from the waist down
 The morning turns to afternoon
 before my eyes
 thistledown air
 thickening
 turning dense as a wild enchanted pelt
 fully alive and breathing.

II.
 (anticipazione)

Time will not end
 as grand loud news
 like that car
 slamming a telephone pole
 not twenty yards from my window.
 The end
 of even small installments
 are not gravely announced
 but occur on paper
 like an accident
 in the back pages
 of the morning paper
 unread
 except by early morning toilet-sitters.
 They come off like newsprint
 anonymously
 on your fingers
 and go unnoticed
 for hours later
 until you wonder
 where they could have come from
 a stain of proof
 like smut on the nose
 placed by parents
 at Christmas

to absolve my doubts
about Santa Claus.
Now I doubt everything.

I am stooping
dropped my checkbook
bowing farewell
to faces
familiar and unknown
and none of them knows it
not even me
most of the time.
I laugh out loud
for the strangeness.
They don't know why
and I don't either.

III.
(rinunzia)

These stone walls of erudition
have borne me up
like a wolf, suckling children
but now she sees I am human
and I see she is a wolf.
Let me rise from this reverie
of twenty years
like a warm bed
grown rancid
with ripe juices
my sweat of adults in late spring
ether of children soured.
Let me rise from this reverie
as though it were by choice
and follow the pale small piping
of my life
my life
a small maelstrom of tiny silver birds
billowing billowing
past trees and houses
past everything I know
everything I knew
leading singing
red into the sun.

— Jeff Humphries





The Patient

When the corn shafts fell broken
 And the fields rusted with rain
 Yellow and hungry, you wanted to throw your griefs
 at my feet
 like some kind of disciple
 That bones and stones would forget.

When the shadows closed corners
 Tucking the evening lights one by one
 Into the fruitless ground,
 You wanted to throw your facts
 in my lap
 like some kind of soothsayer
 Who sings after wars.

When the morning finally washed
 The last idle colour from the field
 And farmers lay heavens to the side;
 You donned the whites of the country.
 You wanted to put your hands
 to my face
 like some kind of priest
 Who protects the innocent from the last crime.

—Caroline C. Ford

The Mad Pomegranate Tree

(adapted from Odysseus Elytis)

A high, interrogative
mood at early morning
à perdre halein

In these pure white courtyards where the south wind blows
Whistling in arched passageways, tell me is it the mad pomegranate
tree
Who leaps in the light, scattering her fruit-bearing laugh
With the fickleness and whispers of wind, tell me is it the mad pomegranate
tree
Who trembles at daybreak with newborn foliage
Exposing every color on high with a shiver of triumph?

When in the fields where the naked girls awaken
Plucking clover with their blonde hands
Roving the margins of their slumbers, tell me is it the mad pomegranate tree
Who inundates their names with warbling, tell me
Is it the mad pomegranate tree who battles the clouds of earth?

On the day that in envy dresses up in seven kinds of plumes
Girdling the sun with a thousand blinding prisms
Tell me is it the mad pomegranate tree
Who in mid-course seizes her streaming hair in a hundred twigs
Never unhappy and never complaining, tell me is it the mad pomegranate
tree
Who cries out the new hopes that are dawning?

Tell me is it the mad pomegranate tree who hellos to us in the distance
Waving a handkerchief of leaves of cool fire
A sea near term with a thousand and one ships
With waves that a thousand and one times surge and ebb
On odorless seacoasts, tell me is it the mad pomegranate tree
Who rattles the high rigging in the transparent sky?

High above with clusters of purple grapes that flash and celebrate
Arrogantly, full of danger, tell me is it the mad pomegranate tree
Who explodes with light in the middle of the world the evil weather of the
demon
Who stretches farther and farther the crocus collar of day
Embroidered with song of the ripe grain, tell me is it the mad pomegranate
tree
Who hurriedly loosens the silks of day?

Amid the petticoats of April Fool's and the locusts of the Dormition
Tell me, she who plays, she who gets angry, she who seduces,
Shaking out threat, shaking the black evil darkness out of it
Pouring out the intoxicating birds on the breast of the sun
Tell me, she who opens her wings to the bosom of everything
On the breast of our deepest dreams, is it the mad pomegranate tree?

—translated from the Greek by Jewell Smith



Her Dream of the Corridor (La Vida es Sueño)

Ce Conte s'adresse à l'Intelligence du
lecteur, qui met les choses en scène,
elle-même.

— Mallarmé.

Lena

After this activity she let herself entirely subside, dissolve into the sheets and the stuffing of the bed, as into water, were she salt, or the sea, if drowning; and having not even that hardness in her to resist and rise for a breath; but her stony members, echoing to the shocks of the day, lay passive and seemed to her tired mind to shift, if at all, with the motion of a heavy, slow tide over them. She was no longer hardening one muscle or another, but let them fade into the diffuse mud of the sea floor, or slightly turn, as they would, she having sunk. What her mind had held as in a tight fist, some precious handful, now began to fall loose from between those relaxing fingers and she watched it, remotely, run out; enough, let it all; she did not cling to it, being certain, by old habit, that it would all be there, solid and recomposed, in time when next she would need it. But how hard, she thought, to subside, that first time of all, it might have been. She heard her breathing, feeling more of herself in the breath than in the lung or nostril, and as the breath sailed out into the corners of the room and found its way out the open window to the cold black air and few stars, so she lost the boundary defining herself from the bed, extending herself to become (in her subsided body and mind) heavy, wide, four-footed and unmoving, without a creak in her, from there sinking into the parallel and nailed-down floor, which at four equal edges rose suddenly straight, breaking once, and through that eye partway open she too fled, dispersing in the night air like an unforced plume of smoke, voyaging, entirely without weight,

repeating now her trick and stepping once more through the squared-off jamb, this time no more as a breath but with her daytime feet and shoulders. Only it was no longer the outside window, it was a trap door which let down from somewhere in the ceiling above them, whose suspended chain she had never noticed. Here Bascom, now dressed, was drawing himself up through it after her, with an agile pull, twist and straightening of his arms, seating himself on the rim while his legs rose to the attic floor and he stood, letting the door down silently — to wake nobody.

No more light from below once the door was shut, but something made it possible for her to see. Under the narrow roof beams they moved, stumbling and catching with their bare feet against the scattered attic trash, odor of dust drying in their breath. She saw to either side of a narrow clear path open trunks of clothes from years and people she had never known, hats and shawls and long gloves out of their boxes and left in disorder, as if someone

had been meddling among them, one stiff dress sprawling over her trunk in an attitude of grief, with nobody inside it; stacked frames enclosing her and her cousin's fathers; a rust-spotted mirror in a huge gilt frame from long ago; and more, broken pieces of wooden chests, loose ornaments, among which she stepped now lightly, in her wish to stop and examine all these bits and relics, almost forgetting Bascom behind her—insistent though ignored.

For they were not stopping here in the attic with all the cracked tokens, they were going on, and to the tower! She could not say where she had heard this, nor did her memory affix any tower to the house, but they passed on through the low attic and its dark contents until at the far end they stopped before a closed door, off its hinges and leaning on its jamb, whose stiffened knob she took in her hand, feeling the grains of rust. Taking hold and drawing it to her she pulled it down on herself: it came down heavily on her and on Bascom who tried to catch it—bruising her shoulder and thigh, for it was a heavy door—and when she had stepped aside with her ache and drawn face he let it drop to the floor loudly. She stepped into the next room on it, (as if, she thought, she were a mounted knight and this the drawbridge leading into an unknown castle; indeed she could almost see the water and scum beneath her, but this image disappeared)—and now before her, through the threshold, was a narrow wooden stair which led upwards from her feet, around the tower in successive doublings, with angled wooden walls and fanning steps, some warped with dryness, all noisy as she climbed. On these she went up into the dark hurriedly, almost running first from hope and then from fear, circling time after time until nothing but this turning and climbing seemed possible to her. A shadow of light, like moonlight without moon, began to color an angle ahead of her; and stepping up to it she again could recognize boards and walls, and saw its source, a small bull's-eye window at the top of the stair and high above where the last step ended—too high for her to reach, but not waiting for Bascom she tried jumping and after a few failures caught the rim; drew herself up to it; and as it was open, she recalled that she had meant to climb out of it, but how when she had no rope to slow her fall or draw her back up from the bottom? Now the top step seemed far away below her, too far for her to want to drop, as if she had pushed off a dock. But she had hardly begun looking for a line when she knew she was going to slip out this porthole, as if a vacuum, wind or some other great compulsion were drawing her from this last corner of the stair whose steps and seamed boards were known to her. Staring with fear into the well as she was slipping out, she saw, finally, Bascom, looking much older and wearied, appear from the vague, and as there was no stopping herself she called, thrusting one arm again through the window, reaching after what she could not see any more; and felt his slow palm leaping in her own. She struggled to climb up by his hold, yet despite her desperation she slipped somehow and went flying down, now not even as alongside a wall, but completely void of any matter to see, feel, scrape against with a sound; only the hand remaining in hers, which, she guessed, was Bascom. Wind seemed to pass by her ears although she felt none along her falling body.

Without any jolt, as if opening her eyes, she found herself standing on a

level ground;—as if, she thought, she had been standing there from the first and had only imagined in a vertigo her wild fall, as when in dreams she had fallen and fallen like a meteor to condense again as a body resting on her bed. Lifting her hand curiously she saw that Bascom was not there—for she held only his skin in her hand, which he had shed, like a snake's—but he was not a snake—all kinds of things were out of place; but at least she had not said that. She let it drop and it was no more.

She had thought it a fall out of a window but where she had come seemed more a kind of plain, or desert—or even, a kind of innermost room, windowless and doorless. About her there was a kind of light, like the white diffused light of overcast days; this alone surrounded her, with no indication of wall, floor, ceiling, limits, merely this whiteness (she might as well have been blind) with no boundary or thing other than herself in all her sight, not even the curvature of the earth. She looked for any lights or shadows muffled by the whiteness, but discovered that this whiteness was not a fog, it was a clarity so shocking that no appearance dimmed it or could show itself through it. She seemed even to forget her body, was her sight.

Lighter than ever and unpursued by distance, she began to walk, if she might think it walking, or to proceed, towards where she imagined she might have fallen from. Bascom might have come down after her and in this void she might lose him completely. She called, once or twice, loudly, but with no assurance that anything heard. Several times more, now louder and with some desperation, for how could she ever find him again in this blank waste? She was lost completely and he could never find her here nor she him, and this was how it would be forever; she seemed to sink to the bottom, sick with worry, a great aridity in her chest collapsing its whole thin tent of bone, like a vacuum. And the pain of the dryness in her throat—for here she was, after everything she had ever tried to do, wholly alone now for all eternity—she would sooner be nothing at all. Perhaps she had died and gone to hell? She would not think of that; that would be one of her mother's accusations. One last time she unwound her throat and called out into the blank, as if lost in a flying snow, after Bascom.

A breath outside her own, unifying with her own and diverging from it, came nearer and grew, and she moved to it, speaking to herself more than to him, confusedly mixing calls and invitations. She might not be completely alone.

Gradually it was not him at all, but an indefinite blackish shape condensing on the air, something like a dirty smoke; and yet with an animal breath, moving, she saw, as if heavy and weak, chained, or armored; with no faculties seeing her, with no senses obviously smelling her and (like a raging bull beyond a brittle fence) her fear, and as it came forth towards her she choked on the word of joy she had been about to shout to Bascom who had not been himself but this nameless cloud. With no recollection of having turned she was running. Now, as if in a fairy tale, the void she had crossed had suddenly become a wall and grove of thorns, impossibly wide, so high that she saw no sky through the spikes and only a very vague light intricated through the barbs. With this beast behind her steps she stumbled, throwing

herself against the branches, guarding only her eyes with the palm of one hand, and then, desperate for speed, she began pulling the branches apart and thrusting her head, shoulders, then the rest of her through the closing gap she had made, until she was almost swimming (the pursuing beast heard loudly through the hasty paths she had made) until she had forgotten about keeping upright—now like a snake or rabbit she tried to crawl and flow through the briars. Throughout the beast followed her closely but gained no distance on her, like the moon accompanying a fast ride in a car, or a horizon approached and never arrived at, watched from the deck of a ship. But she did not dare to rest and risk its not stopping—so rushed on, bloody now everywhere and no longer feeling injuries of her torn flesh, only afraid for her hidden life itself which only death would catch and scar—through more tortures and windings of the branches she ran, crawling, with no direction at all, for she was not thinking of being saved, of finding any other person or any thing other than herself and this black fog in this markless place, with no trail, or perhaps such an infinity of trails that she could see none of them. With her hurrying and running her breath broke as if she had fallen from a high place, and it was moments of pain before she found air. More and more deeply the thorns repeated their cuts, scratching her very bones by now she thought, and her strength was foundering—she wondered if she would be run to death or devoured, or would she ever have run far enough? Stumbling she fell through one more bush to strike her face on the ground; let it take me now, she thought, once stopped she would not begin again. It could have the whole waste to itself. But on raising her head she found a small circular clearing, empty and dark as the wood, on which she had chanced; standing, she recognized that unnamed creature, now almost only a breathing impossible to see, quite silent even of his breath, standing before her in the ring. She had stopped and it had stopped. If she made any step or motion, she knew now, it would repeat her as if in a mirror. Everything was still now, balancing between the two of them. If she held in her hand a sword—but what sword, in this wilderness of absence? and where to bring the heavy thing down to chop between neck and shoulder and leave the bloody pieces as she went off, alone, to rest? There was nothing, only herself. She breathed deeply and in her fear could not breathe out except in breaks and starts—then, slowing, stepping before her; the breathing shape advanced a step before; two more slow steps each, and they were meeting in the middle.

She would wrestle, if there was anything to take hold of. She leapt on it (thinking of God), all tensed and furious;

and fell, fell more agonizingly than ever before, having touched nothing but vacuum in her spring—through an absolute night which she, always having had eyes, had never imagined—without the weakest, most distant light, and no sense of approaching an end or a floor—and she fell with such fear and pain, her hands contorted, her nails piercing her palms, her own nails, which she had cut and so carefully rounded! that she would gladly have broken into atoms and dissolved everything only to have found an end at last. Slowly the pain in her palms conceived constellations upon her blindness, resolving, and she began to see instants of her days as if she were

drowning and had given up every last effort (and as there was no earthly bottom anywhere to this, it was the same), her mother's stiff frightened look as she herself had flung the heavy door (the knocker resounding) back at her face; her father dying, looking up at them from his noiseless solitude with the same eyes; she saw Bascom, but without his skin, such as she must have left him up above, bleeding from every inch of his stripped body like a dissected man laid bare in the encyclopedia, red as a baby; and seeing all this as she fell faster and faster she forgot whether she was falling head foremost or how, for here it did not matter, heads or tails hardly existed where there was no way to know them or assume them—so gone that certainty! On she fell, hearing a persistent voice which called for her head (or could it be the monster's) readied in a dish of gold—who had said that, with her own voice? She had failed with the black beast; it could be her due.

As she thought of this, in her imagination her predestined dish far below her began to appear, a dim sun, growing, and she swam after it, pulling with all her strength through the nothingness toward the one visible thing in all this midnight where even gravity was a pretense. It grew and took on borders, and abruptly as she, fascinated, appearing in its brightness, seized it, it became the bull's eye window. She hung still. Now she could descend the tower, as she hung there—but the window was smaller than before and she struggled and wrestled to get even her hard and paining head through without cracking it. She pulled and forced it to the small opening, drawing it back and ramming it, and violently shattering something, her head or the casement, that hardly mattered, for she was through, thus far, and hung there panting, dazed, dragged as before outwards by attraction or tide, but this was her only chance in all this empty night to return—she wrestled and thrashed in every direction to bring her stubborn shoulders through, never mind if they snapped, then her sequential ribs and the rest—finally her waist and hip bones caught and would not be drawn through the tiny opening, now constricting her impossibly, which seemed to have grown smaller with every one of her movements until it now belted her like a needle's eye, shrinking like a star she thought, until she herself seemed to be nothing more than this pain and the immediate dust she breathed from her nostrils, hanging in the cramped wooden hallway above the receding stair, as her senses shrank to a point and her fear of losing half of herself to that void swelled, until she placed her hands on the casement and pushed with any strength she might have yet, cracking the wood apart, her bones perhaps too, passing through, then dropping with the last great noise of thunder; her legs slipped through, she let herself fall to any death, collapsed on the stairs, tumbling rapidly across the steps like a fish slipped into a creel,

while slowly her mind faded into her body. Nothing at all, in her blankness, was any longer there except a pinkish light of blood, the live blood beating in her eyelids, as her being, like a paling sky, spread once more throughout the flesh sensitive to the wrinkled and partially tucked-in sheets that wrapped around it; her breathing was tied to that of another, but she did not even start, opening her eyes slowly to the calm morning light of a winter sun not yet out of the tangled black trees, reflected from a pale white

sky, giving recognizable shape to objects she had once known, the window, the bedstead, her waxen foot, in their old positions from which they had never moved.

All the breath left her. Though she had said, "Why, this is dying," when she had gone out with her curling breath—yet, suddenly, as she sensed the heaviness of her flesh, how much more like death and the grave this was, to lie, as always before, heavily in a knotted bed, life to take up again, Bascom's dark back breathing loudly at her side, nothing in her changed except the breath which still trembled like the shaking sides of an exhausted runner!

Death or life, though, at least she touched no scars in her even skin; so those despairs had been nothing. Her dread grew fainter and her breathing, like rough winds, quieted; for after all, as she told her calming self, none of that had been real, she could forget it all, there was nothing to be afraid of—for the day had come and she was moving again in its familiar light. Turning toward Bascom, she half-awoke him, shaking his loose muscles to make him answer her.

"I've had a bad dream," she said, and asked him to comfort her.

—Haun Saussy

The Turning

Corners turn,
 Not like pages in a book
 That lie in layers, understood,
 But abrupt
 Division of a space
 From that which came before.
 I turned a corner once
 And found you there;
 The alchemy of tears
 Transformed your hand to granite
 As I tumbled into an abysmal fear,
 Fell clawing and
 In clawing, grasped for you.
 I woke up then;
 And woke up once again
 When the fear had changed
 To silence and apologies.
 I had fallen once too often —
 I had clawed the rock face sheer.
 I rose from bed and paced,
 My back to you, until
 I turned
 And saw the corner winging by,
 A black blade
 Cutting off my view of you.
 A sudden stranger to my bed
 You lay, and I in knowing
 Loomed a giant's shadow
 Over you — over you,
 And very far away.

— Anne Morris



Yvonne Blum

I Am

(You are your own best lover, she said.)

My life is just another birth,
My lovers midwives sweating at my side,

Kissing the post-partum tears
And coddling the newest Anne,

Another greedy child —
A life of bearing children;

Mother, nurse, lover of the curse,
Precursor of the pain

And bearer of the joy,
'Tis I, 'tis I.

— Anne Morris

Meeting with Van Gogh

1

You have given yourself flowers of the sun
in winter, a simple lyric to decorate a sullen

room, to satisfy a fancy, to insist on
summer while you watch snow, brooding a life

to ruin. You create crescendos it seems,
but I ask quietly to know only just what

this bouquet can mean; each petal has held
the morning's warmth and fondled the dawn

in its own religion; yet you thought you were alone.

The stems dance to the music of light;
giant disks, as if eyes the gold of coin,
watch each other in their frivolity; one
bows to the brightness of its own reality.

2

I have entered, unannounced, according to your
silent invitation. Not in the chaos

of my own philosophy, but in this space,
your room at rest with its simplicity,

I am given to sensation. I am taken
by the window, the shutters almost shut,

but live afraid to peer out, afraid to see
what I might see. It is night, I am sure.

Thoughtfully you have left a light burning.

The mirror is white, not reflecting a bowl
and jug carefully set on the table, your painting
hung on the wall, or two ladder-back chairs
arranged as though you really did expect guests.

3

I have contemplated Christ's passion
and I stare to a night of stars.

It is not so much that I am sitting
alone and the windows are dark,

rather the blueness is a tormented sky,
rather a god's mind then my own.

If I exist outside your music, it
probably cannot be helped. I've kept

vigil though, waiting to understand.

The steeple bends with the curve of cypress;
stars blossom and sing the holy ghost's
song to the light of the crooked moon,
a yellow like flowers.

4

If you have crossed your father's faith,
I blame only the madness of the world's

being. Your architecture is bright again,
yet the windows are too stained to let light

either out or in. I'd say the scene is
windless; no motion but the brush. I am not

troubled by the village in the corner,
but by the sky which knows your sacrifice

and the blood spilled on the roof.

The Byzantine stone has slowly grown from
the greens of earth; each stroke of the path,
a footfall, leads her either way; and she
steps lightly by in the darkness of day.

5

I walk now with your reflection too much
in my sight, disquieted by a godless art,

color which I cannot comprehend, which I
cannot, in my imperfection, sing as you might

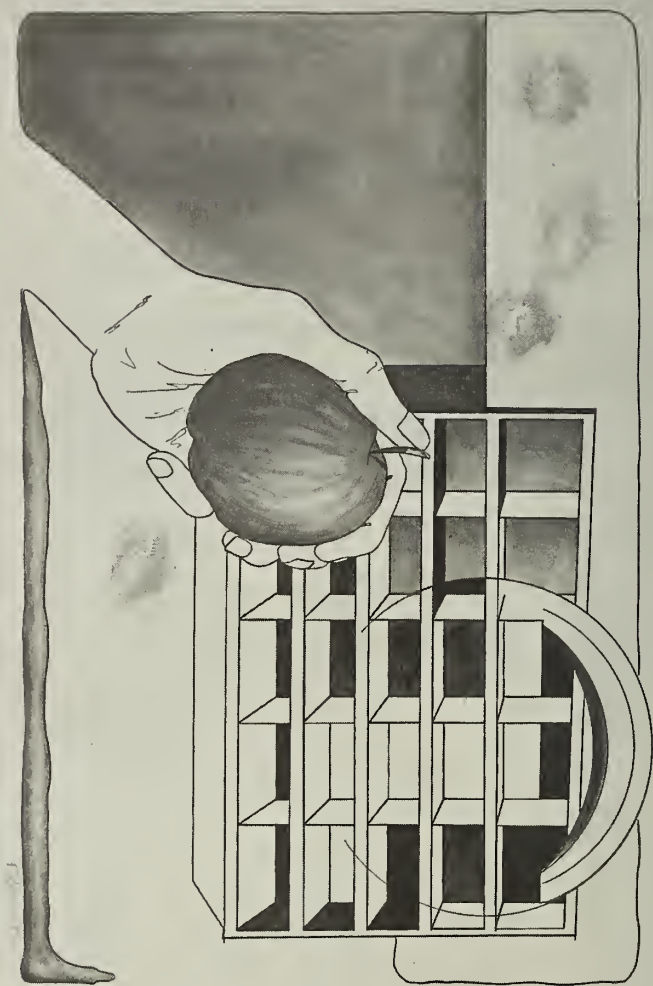
have wished. My mind is a different will and
you are this canvas while I am only flesh.

My time is lost in the washed-blue spirals
which somehow worship the moon's freedom

and somehow know they are their own kingdom.

The nose is jagged under the frown of heavy
brows; the beard is frayed beside your pale,
still lips; in a last demand for silence,
you gaze, dull-eyed, as though you never prayed.

— William Brown



Or Would You Rather Be A Fish?

At the sounding of the dozen bells that urgently forewarn, "Go home, or suffer the consequences!" midnight's new arrivals parked their two- and four-door monsters in the barn among the wary cattle, and clambered up the ladder to the Loft, where Baby's Jazzy Friends were making hay. Where privileged tongues thrilled to Baby's wines and exotic hors d'œuvres, and lithe bodies swayed to rhythms never before so passionately rendered, a scene of unprecedented splendor unfolded. With the stratospheric glissandi of a brisk tango—roaring off a concert grand, raking wild excitement up each spine—the frenzy of the evening's festivities peaked miraculously at the midnight hour, when in an unexpected move, the concert grand's tortured keys rode angrily up the keyboard and locked defiantly in a cobra-like arch. The stunned crowd froze and fell silent for the first time that evening, enraptured by the spectacle, as evening advanced into morning. It was an exultant moment.

Now that the new day had come at last, the long-building tension broke, and a relief was felt by all. The keys relaxed their dramatic posture and tumbled rhythmically into their proper places, like dominoes in syncopated chain reaction. And everyone in breathless voices proclaimed that the event had been "jazzy," and vowed never, never to forget it.

By the time that the new arrivals made their entrance in the Loft, Baby's Jazzy Friends had pared down to their barest undergarments and kissed their worn-out chic good-bye, cruelly abandoning it for something more sublime and perennially more fashionable. Hostess Baby, clad in Dior diapers, brushed through the bustling crowd and greeted her new guests with precious kisses. Then with one swift gesture of an arm, she motioned for silence.

"My friends," she announced ceremoniously, "the time has come when the best of all that's heavenly shall meet. Let us not delay that meeting any further." The Jazzy Friends cheered and advanced quickly toward the new arrivals with outstretched arms. "Clasp hands!" Baby cried above the uproar. "Clasp hands and show your love!" They heeded Baby's command and, as the piano player struck up a spirited new tune, took off about the room in a breakneck farandole. And the party recommenced, sparkling anew in a hypno-erotic blend—a rare and expensive creation afforded only in the Loft.

Baby looked on and smiled.

From the backseat of a taxi that moved north of Chicago en route to Baby's swell affair, Trenton Pratt looked out through the window and gazed up at the stars. The stars were humming with the news of Baby Hollis, and everyone was looking to the heavens to learn about Baby and what was happening atop the hill in the Hollis Loft. No one knew very much in truth about Baby, except perhaps her Jazzy Friends, and as the most potential inductee into their fabled ranks, Trent was reeling with vertigo, stunned by the heights to which he had climbed at the age of twenty-seven.

Only a little over a year ago, Trent had existed in near obscurity, struggling to earn a living as a film-maker in New York City. As he himself was fond of saying, he was "universally ignored." But then through a series of fortuitous circumstances that he never fully understood, his films began to catch on, steadily growing in popularity until he became what is known in the entertainment world as a phenomenon, a tabloid personality. In time, Baby heard of Trent's success and developed a longing to see his films. Through a series of special screenings, she saturated herself in his work, acquiring such a fondness for it that she vowed she would not rest until she had him under contract to feature her in a film. As always, Baby got what she wanted. She made Trent a generous offer, and he jumped to accept it. It was simply the best year of his life. But that night, as the taxi moved closer to the Loft and the film's premiere, he looked to the stars and worried: how was he going to figure into the rest of Baby Hollis' illustrious history?

As Trent had come to learn, Baby's Jazzy Friends had been a well-known institution for almost thirty years. Ever since 1948 and the death of Wild Daddy Hollis—one of the most notorious gangster figures ever to have emerged from Prohibition both wealthy and alive—Baby, his only heir, had carried on in the eccentric tradition her father had established back in the twenties, when the Loft was new and Baby was a child. A barn-like mansion of Wild Daddy's own design, the Loft was constructed as both a showcase for his most cherished possessions and a playhouse for his most beloved friends. It was vulgar in its opulence, but in its vulgarity it held a sensational appeal for the Jazz Age smart set. Nightly, the Cords, the Packards, the Dusenburgs, and Silver Ghosts crammed the downstairs garage (where Wild Daddy also kept the cattle that he allowed to graze freely on the grounds during the day), and the bedazzled visitors dashed up the steep staircase—the so-called ladder—to the Loft proper, where they might be seen on display in Wild Daddy's museum of unlikely artifacts and people.

Like everyone else who had ever heard of Baby's upbringing with Wild Daddy, Trent felt simultaneously intrigued and scandalized by it. Raised without a mother (the woman said to be her mother allegedly died shortly after Baby's birth), Baby came by her fame at an early age, popping up in bars and high-class brothels with her father all over town. Wild Daddy would take his Baby anywhere. But then there could be no place more shocking than the Loft, where nightly scenes of scandal were said to occur, as sketchily reported upon in the morning papers. No two people were ever so worshiped and despised as Wild Daddy and Baby. They were nefarious superstars, and everyone looked up to them in awe, entranced by their stellar incandescence. Everyone wished on the Hollis stars.

The taxi turned off the highway and started up the final stretch of road toward the Loft. Trent had taken a sedative in the airport and was enjoying its first effects in the retreat of the taxi's shadows. He had spent the most part of the evening hiding out in the chaos of O'Hare International, waiting for midnight to come. According to Baby's plans, he would make a dramatic entrance late in the evening, thus delaying the screening of the film until her guests were suitably frenzied with anticipation. If they were even half as

excited as he was, Trent thought, the premiere would be a smash.

By now, he had ceased to stargaze and started to toy with one of the cuff links that Baby had given him as a going-away present upon his departure for New York to edit the film. He held his arm to the window and turned his wrist, attempting to catch the light from the full moon in the cuff link's diamond setting. At first, it merely sparkled. But then, as if an inner fire were erupting from the stone, the light suddenly intensified and jetted into his eyes, momentarily blinding him. The light jarred him from his serenity, and in those final moments before his arrival, the memory of the Loft flooded back to him and the light that he had so often encountered there.

When Trent came to the Loft on that day a year ago, he stopped and admired himself in the mirror that hung inside the entranceway at the top of the ladder. His slight but handsome frame appeared elongated in reflection, which pleased him. For after all the elaborate preparations that he had undergone to make himself presentable to Baby, he felt that only his lack of height might mar his otherwise immaculate appearance. Dressed in dark tweeds, carefully matched to his thick dark brown hair, he hoped that Baby might be impressed by the respectability of his bearing and overlook his diminutive stature.

A servant greeted him at the door, and he sauntered inside with a swagger that said, "I have arrived!"

"This way, Mr. Pratt," said the servant, leading him down a corridor to yet another doorway. "Miss Hollis will receive you in the library." Trent nodded and hurried past him through the doorway, eager for his reception.

But the Loft did not receive him well. Overstuffed and baroque-ly ornate, it was far more powerfully humbling than he had expected. The decor was loud, though too ferocious to be called merely gaudy or distasteful. The Loft shouted its existence, and Trent dared not shout back to prove his strength against it. Unaccustomed to poor receptions, however, he stood his ground and attempted to face the Loft head-on. But as he glared about him, hoping at least to intimidate a snarling boar's head ashtray, the room exaggerated itself even more, and its terrors came alive. Shelvesful of glossy, new-smelling hardbacks shot up behind him and tapped him on the back, and said, "Pardon me. I don't believe we've met," while an enormous Pop Art vase accosted him and poured out threats to his security. Decorative lucite panels that hung on the rough wood walls caught the afternoon light from the windows and aimed it at him in sinister, dart-like rays. And all the room picked up and herded toward him, trumpeting the news, "*You ain't jazzy,*" and then bounced and spun about on his head.

Dizzied and panic-stricken, Trent missed Baby's entrance altogether and took a plunge into the open mouth of a swallow-up armchair, ensconcing himself in cushions. He felt dwarfed by the gargantuan chair, while unbeknown to him, Baby loomed behind him, exaggerating the meagerness of his form even more. In a desperate effort to find a comfortable nest in the bulky softness of the chair, he turned to wrestle with a cushion, when he felt an ominous presence and looked heavenward, gazing upon Baby's voluminous torso for the first time. A jungle of printed palms, her Miami

Beach tunic draped loosely from her chest until it met a well-rounded abdomen, which expanded and expanded, disappearing out of sight below the back of Trent's chair. Two large, non-functional looking arms cascaded down her sides in drooping bulges of flesh, and their fine rosy texture met his eyes for the first time and hit him where he lived. To Trent, Baby was enormously voluptuous and impressive, and he was poetically awed.

Eager to meet the head atop this intriguing, unique body, he jumped to his feet and rounded the chair. But with the chagrin one might feel upon greeting an unfortunate trick-or-treater who neither has a mask nor needs one, his mouth dropped open, and he all but lied when he said, "It's such a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Hollis." With her red hair cropped short and her oversized ears flapping out conspicuously on each side, Baby's head was positively runty and altogether unbecoming to her generously proportioned body.

Trent nervously extended an arm, which Baby met with a soft, fat hand. Then she smiled and spoke to him for the first time—and far more meaningfully than he could yet grasp—"The pleasure's all mine, Mr. Pratt." With her other hand, she offered him a glass of wine and indicated that he take a seat. He returned reluctantly to the armchair, while Baby lowered herself precariously onto a dainty divan.

Surprisingly enough, their initial conversation commenced smoothly, and before long, they began to speak with jocular familiarity.

"Trenton...Trent? Oh, of course. Trent. Tell me. Am I truly a subject for your camera?" Baby surged with laughter and toppled over into a reclining position on the divan, coyly masking her face with a large Spanish fan. Baby's feigned naivete charmed him.

"Are you a subject for my camera! Why yes, Baby, and so much more."

"But you will use filters, won't you, Trent?"

"Certainly not! You haven't a flaw to hide. From a distance you'll entice my telephoto, and in close-up, my wide-angle lens will simply fog!" Baby fanned herself madly, tossing back her little head exuberantly, and cackled. To Trent, she had taken on a sort of glow, reminding him of a Rubens figure—an overindulged cherub, still divinely weightless despite her size.

"Trent, you are more than kind!"

"Yes, I am, come to think of it," he said not thinking how the remark sounded, for Baby's glow was reassuring, and he ceased to be afraid. And the glow continued to intensify, until the light in Trent's eyes had grown so bright that he no longer even noticed the unfortunate size of Baby's head.

The excitement that followed in the next month both cheered Trent and worried him. Living in the Loft in constant association with the Jazzy Friends was even more splendid than his childhood fantasy of what it would be like to take a wild swing on a star. His place in the Loft was one of honor. But it worried him: what if he failed to come up with a suitable idea for the film soon? What could he do then but admit that he was not up to the standards of the Jazzy Friends? "Sorry, Baby," he would have to say. "I guess my head is just full of straw." Then he would find himself impaled on Baby's pitchfork and hurled from the Loft, without so much as moonbeams to carry home in a jar.

A brainchild did occur to him, however, late in that first month at the Loft. Baby was having one of her bashes, this one wilder than most, and Trent found himself bored. During such interminable evenings as these, he had taken to confiding in his favorite among the Jazzy Friends, a rough looking Swedish woman everyone knew as Svelte. In her ravaged appearance, he saw nothing that might have ever warranted her peculiar name. Rather, she had a burnt-out look, as if weathered by exposure to too many fads and too many nights in the Loft. But she was as attentive and thoughtful a listener as he had ever known, and he admired her greatly.

In the library far away from the party's roar, Trent spelled out his worries about the film in agonizing detail. Svelte listened quietly, nodding periodically, until he was finished. Then she prepared to speak, assuming a tough-cookie pose, cupping her cigarette holder in her palm for aesthetic effect.

"Let me tell you about Baby," she began slowly, savoring each word to highlight her thick accent. "Baby is so wonderful. You think so too? Ja. Someone once compared Baby to the Hostess with the Mostest. I am thinking this is not so good a comparison. Baby is so much more than a hostess. She is so much more. Baby *gives*. Baby gives to me; Baby gives to you; Baby gives to *everybody*. Why Baby is a smorgasbord! That's right. A smorgasbord. How you say! — everyone rolls in her hay."

Certainly, Trent felt that Baby was the most generous person he had ever known. Everybody loved Baby for her generosity. She was Mother Magnanimous, there was no doubt about it.

"Excuse me, Svelte," Trent interrupted. "I have some important news to tell Baby."

He hurried out of the library and down the corridor to the scene of the party. In the middle of the room, Baby reclined on the lid of her concert grand, belting out a masochistic rendition of "All of Me," delirious with intoxication. He crossed the room and leaned over to speak directly in her ear.

"Baby. I have wonderful news." With some effort, she lifted herself upright and stared blankly at his face.

"Tell me, Trent. What could it be?" He lifted his arms high above his head and waved them excitedly.

"It's finally happened, Baby. I thought it never would, but it has."

"What's happened, dear?" She tilted to one side, holding her abdomen, as if she were about to be ill.

"You, Baby. You have happened." Then in a voice that everyone could hear, he platitudinously announced, "A star is born!" Baby's eyes rolled up into her head, and she passed out on the piano.

In the near distance, the celestial glow of the Loft came into Trent's view through the windshield of the taxi. He braced himself, having forgotten how magnificently the Loft shone when one of Baby's galas was at full force. In his lap rested a copy of a newspaper that he had bought to pass the time in the airport. Awed by the sight of the Loft, he looked down at the paper to reassure himself that the event was actually real. A large headline topped the page: BABY HOLLIS MAKES SCREEN DEBUT TONIGHT. Underneath, a

lengthy article followed, accompanied by a photograph of Baby and Trent taken during the shooting of the film. He held the paper to the window to closer examine it under the bright moonlight. The picture showed the two of them cuddled up together at a corner table in a posh restaurant, looking exceedingly happy. But he noticed that an unfortunate blur obscured Baby's side of the photograph, exaggerated by the light that reflected from her enormous rings and the shadow that her menu cast across her face. Poor Baby, he thought. After all, she was the star.

As the taxi started up the Loft's long driveway, the driver glanced over his shoulder at Trent.

"Isn't that something? That woman sure does know how to celebrate."

"Sure does," Trent said.

"Hey, I bet you're in that movie of hers." He thought how ridiculous it might sound if he told the man the truth.

"No, she's just a friend."

"I sure could use a friend like that."

The taxi pulled up and stopped before the Loft. Trent's eyes scaled its structure until they advanced beyond it and fixed on the stars. He felt his vertigo returning.

"All of this for one woman," the driver said. "This sure is a strange world we live in."

If anyone was ever capable of understanding Wild Daddy's purpose in building the Loft, it was Trent as he entered unnoticed at half-past midnight and observed the Jazzy Friends strewn like wreckage in all directions. They were museum pieces, all right, he thought; each one a vintage antique from some short-lived craze. Wild Daddy might well have been impressed by their stunning array—Trent was not. In the crowd, he saw not one welcoming face among the indistinguishable mass.

"Trenton Pratt!" a voice suddenly called out. The crowd stirred from its lethargy in vague recognition of his name. "Trent," the voice called again. He turned to see Baby, rushing forward to greet him. "Look, everybody. It's our guest of honor, Trent!" Slowly, the crowd came back to life, as a flock of reporters made their presence known and gathered all around him. And for ten long minutes, flashbulbs ignited in his face, and he found himself blinded in the Loft once more.

An hour later, Trent sat in the corner of Baby's library, specially converted for the purpose of the screening, and guzzled wine from a large bottle, wishing that he had never seen the tawdry excesses of the Loft. If a chance had ever existed that Baby's guests might view his film in the frame of mind that he intended, it completely disintegrated in the confused atmosphere that the drunken and weary audience created. From the very onset of the film and the initial close-up of Baby, the crowd had hooted with laughter; and even now as the film advanced into its final moments, their laughter had not abated.

On the screen, Baby moved in an ethereal mist, draped in sheer veils, delicately shaded by pink lights that flatteringly obscured her obesity, while

deeply enriching the rose colors in her skin. But nothing obscured Baby's essential flaw—the tininess of her head, so greatly diminished by the expanses of the screen. Slowly, Baby turned about in her best effort to do a pirouette, while throngs of shrouded worshipers salaamed all about her in sacrificial dance. Arms extended from the shrouds, their fingers bent in crazed, arthritic curls, all eager for the gratifying touch of Baby's skin. Baby herself basked in the glory, her eyes rolled up under fluttering, lustrous lids. Then in a final close-up, to the cruel delight of the audience, her face contorted in an orgasmic smile, and she dropped to the floor. The mist completely flooded the screen, and the red titles appeared: "Rite: A Film by Trenton Pratt." The credits then ran to completion, and the room went black, quaking with derisive laughter.

Trent felt his shirt pull tight about his neck, when someone jerked him from his seat and dragged him from the room. In the light of the corridor, he saw that it was Baby, scowling, all but breathing fire. "You come with me." Baby led him down the length of the corridor, tugging him all the way, and brought him to the outer entranceway to the Loft. "See that," she said pointing through the open doorway down the ladder. "Unless you can think a lot quicker than I think you can, you're going to be bowing out of here."

On his feet for the first time in nearly an hour, Trent swayed slightly, far more intoxicated than he had realized. Baby paused and waited for him to speak. He remained silent, detecting that the taste of the wine had gone sour on his tongue.

"Oh, don't be a coward now. It's a little late. I think if I were on the verge of ruination, I certainly would have a lot to say."

"But Baby," he said, hearing the laughter in the distance, "you're in this with me. My ruination is yours too."

"Mr. Pratt, you really don't know me very well." He looked at her, thinking that he had never heard a truer remark. For the first time since their initial meeting, he saw her head as the inferior embellishment to her body that it really was. The light no longer blinded him.

"No, Baby. I don't know you after all. I misjudged you all along. You're just too much, I guess. The screen simply won't hold you." She flinched, and her face reddened.

"If you have no more to say than that, I would suggest that you leave while it's still safe. I am not in a very benevolent mood."

"But I do have something else to say," he said, leaning forward, leering arrogantly in her face. "Do you know what I am looking at now?" She started to speak, but caught herself and lowered her eyes. "You don't know, and I don't know either. But I do know that I never imagined anything of such tiny proportions could be blown to such a hideous size."

Baby looked up in horror at his remark and in an almost imperceptible flash, smacked him across the face with a sparkling, jewel-laden hand. The blow sent him reeling, and he staggered backwards, stopping precariously on the top step of the ladder.

"So long, Baby," he said, attempting a defiant farewell gesture. But his sudden movement destroyed his balance, and he rocked backwards off the

step. He fell, earthbound, hurtling unguided through space, while the brilliant light from the Loft streaked out of sight above him. But even then, he could still hear the Jazzy Friends and all the rest, laughing at Baby's tiny head.

— Kenneth King



Radio Preacher

Between coughs of static
and the ecstatic
bleating of his flock,
the radio preacher
talks of his life,
how his people were
no more than gypsies
he followed from place
to place, then left,
how temptation bedded
him with sin, drink rolled him
in the gutter, but God
smiled (amen, brother)
and lifted me up,
Jesus be praised. I was
nothing and still may seem
nothing, may be riding
a broken-down car
today, but I'll ride
two angels in Heaven!

— Peter Burian



For Mother

In my worst dreams I have seen your face,
sulphurous and enchanting.
You come to me bent and twisted,
holly in your hair,
a snake coiled about your breast.

You have four eyes and a magic mirror:
you bless and keep me.

This jar you bring me reeks of your incense.
I kneel before you, and with harsh red hands
you anoint my hair and my feet.

Your tongue is cleft, and in the hollows of your throat
lie three sins, and the worst is cunning.

Turning and turning, my back is toward you
and my sighs are for you —
in my worst dreams I smile to see you coming,
in those black nights I stoop to kiss your face.

—Sandy Hingston

Villanelle for a Child

Elisabeth, the darkness in your eyes
Is like a shadow of a cloud at night
Falling across the sepulchral skies,

Or like the sudden deadening of the cries
Of wild geese who lift their wings for flight.
Elisabeth, the darkness in your eyes

Calls your youth liar, and their depth denies
Adam and Eve were ever made by Light
Falling across the sepulchral skies —

We are all children born of tears and sighs,
Graceless and guileful; we have lost the sight,
Elisabeth, the darkness in your eyes.

We wait for the four horsemen to arise,
Watch for the whore, and fear the serpent's bite
Falling. Across the sepulchral skies

We play at suns and stars, and by our lies
Mock at your vision and our spirit's blight,
Elisabeth — the darkness in your eyes
Falling across the sepulchral skies.

—Sandy Hingston

Tryst in Blue

Your method, later your motto
 Was to carry on — in painting
 A plot of solitaire
 Lined with diamond spaces
 That hinted at Giotto.
 You left the stage
 Without a show
 In style, a sophoclean hero
 Scorning the hostile faces, yet
 Induced as issue — modernity.

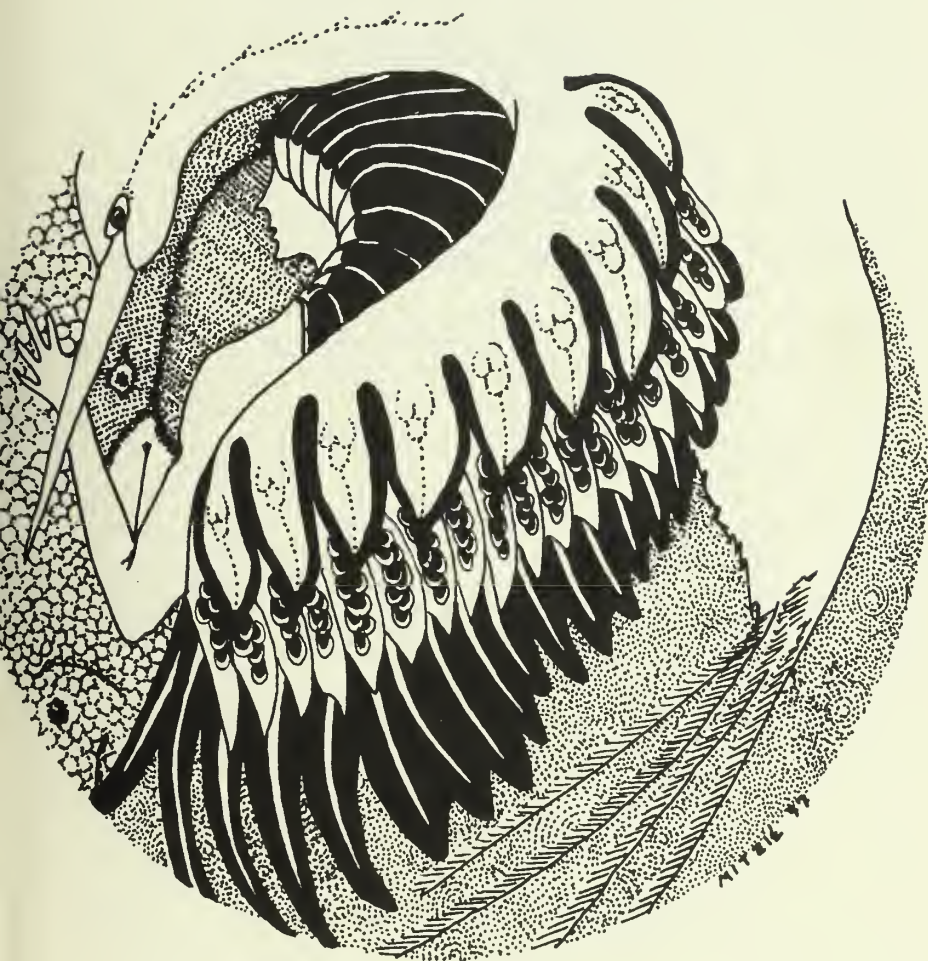
You read the Louvre
 As a hardcover book,
 Returned it to the shelf
 And resumed your painting
 Crossing out Alberti's pages of mimetic lore
 Shunning that Circle for it had no core,
 The maker of chinese images, the madman,
 Those who never probed beyond the object
 Who in dalliance with the surface impression
 Forsook what made the object, the apple, perfect.
 Dispensing with theoretical expression
 You made nature your unknown
 Painted her over in
 Sphere, cylinder, and cone.
 You grew landscapes of cubical spaces
 Tamed Saint-Victoire's many faces
 For unlike her human counterparts
 She never moved.

You spaced your thought amid blue spaces
 There are farm-house cubes, rocks and trees
 Standing static under blue glare.
 Blues stare out from the back-side of bathers
 Patch your apples with roofs
 Tint your goblets like breezes
 Connecting spaces like a drawn boot-lace.

Your blue link, Cezanne
 Forged on the anvil of your canvas
 Glows rhythmic on your triple surface
 A tryst for artists to come.

— Suzanne Ausnit





Queer Bird

Across the well-clipt lawn
where the stripped couples lay,
a flicker comes each day,
picks worms and laughs his scorn.

He is glad that he was born;
he barely knows he was.
He cares not what the cause.
His beak is brittle as horn.

The flicker has his own laws.
The flicker is not me.
I sit and listen, see
and weigh results and cause.

— Herman Salinger

Answering Echo

Ontario's day is a gold and blue
tunnel the bluejay's cry shoots through,
the loudest shout I ever heard
from vulgar man, impertinent bird.

Far southward, nine hundred miles or so,
where these lakes boats could never go,
where only shrimp-boats bob and toss
and the creeping fescue and Spanish moss

green out the lawns and grey the oak,
one talkative mocking-bird just spoke
above some yellow oleanders
where the hot and glittering water wanders.

— Herman Salinger



Elizabeth
Lubethin

Robert Lowell's *Day by Day*

When Robert Lowell died last September at the age of sixty, he was the best-known and most generally admired poet writing in English. Quite aside from the questions of talent and accomplishment there is a certain justice in this, since Lowell was the only *professional* American poet of his generation. Independently wealthy, he had the advantage on his contemporaries of never having to earn a living by teaching or writing novels or journalism or advertising copy; nor was he distracted into criticism. Poetry was his career, and his now completed oeuvre is substantial—eleven collections of original poetry (not including last year's *Selected Poems*), three volumes of translations, and a trilogy of verse plays.

The influence of that work has been enormous. The dense, formal, neo-Metaphysical style of *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) was widely imitated throughout the late forties and fifties, and the autobiographical, so-called "confessional" mode of *Life Studies* (1959) became something of a period style in the sixties and seventies. All his books appeared to fairly standardized accolades from the literary journalists, and his last volume, *Day by Day*, published two months before his death, was no exception. As his most baldly "confessional" work, it certainly marks the conceivable limit of one line of his development as a poet. Largely because of this it seems to me his weakest book.

Day by Day is interesting first on the level of prosody in being Lowell's only volume executed entirely in what might be called strict free verse. Lowell's early work (*Lord Weary's Castle*, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*) was monumentally formal; in particular he proved himself the twentieth century's master of the heroic couplet. There followed a middle period in which he began to write more directly and prosaically; many of the poems in *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead* are in free verse, but a like number are in traditional measures or in what I would call exploded forms (typically employing rhyme at the ends of long, loose lines). Lowell reverted to strict formalism with *Near the Ocean* (1967), a series of poems in tetrameter couplets. The four books preceding *Day by Day*—*Notebook*, *History*, *For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin*—are sequences of unrhymed sonnets (of which there are 368 in *History* alone). In *Day by Day* for the first time Lowell completely eschews rhyme and meter in favor of the lopped lines and choppy rhythms of William Carlos Williams:

No conversation—
then suddenly as always cars
helter-skelter for feed like cows—

suburban surf come alive,

diamond-faceted like your eyes,
glassy, staring lights

lighting the way they cannot see —

(“Suburban Surf”)

Day by Day is the most single-mindedly autobiographical of all Lowell's books, and the grimmest. It is the record of the last four or five years of the poet's life — of the failure of his second marriage and the uncertain progress of his third, of further attempts to come to terms with his guilty lifelong contempt for his parents, of his last breakdown and his confinement in an English mental hospital. The title suggests the predominant mood; the poet is taking it a day at a time, enduring, barely, from day to day.

Above all Lowell is unable to accept the encroachment of old age. “Age is the bilge/we cannot shake from the mop,” he writes in “Ulysses and Circe,” possibly the single bitterest poem he ever produced. There is no compensation here for Lowell, no following Yeats to take refuge and pride in an old man's eagle mind. In another poem he tells us flatly, “Being old in good times is worse/than being young in the worst.”

Not that the times he chronicles here are good. He is overwhelmingly dispirited, and his few elations are short-lived. On the verge of splitting with his second wife, he enjoys the sight of swans on the Liffey River in Ireland:

We sat and watched a mother swan
enthroned like a colossal head of Pharaoh
on her messy double goose-egg nest of sticks.
The male swan had escaped
their safe, stagnant, matriarchal pond
and gallanted down the stout-enriched rapids to Dublin,
smirking drunkenly, racing bumping,
as if to show a king had a right to be too happy.

(“Last Walk?”)

This wonderful stanza is one of the very few heartening things in the book. But the poet's sense of impending liberation and his whimsical misogyny evaporate instantly, and the poem ends with his fear that he and his wife will find themselves

nostalgia pulverized by thought,
nomadic as yesterday's whirling snow,
all whiteness splotched.

The poet is as deeply pessimistic about the present and future of the race as he is bitter about his own condition. Such pessimism has been with Lowell from the beginning, but he has never before expressed it in such profoundly pessimistic *terms*, terms so void of dignity and grace. In *Lord Weary's Castle* he wrote

...It is night,
And it is vanity, and age
Blackens the heart of Adam.

In *Near the Ocean* he was saying

Pity the planet, all joy gone
from this sweet volcanic cone...

Here in *Day by Day* he writes

We feel the machine slipping from our hands
as if someone else were steering;
if we see a light at the end of the tunnel,
it's the light of an oncoming train.

("Since 1939")

The viewpoint is essentially the same; but in contrast to the first two passages above, the third is cynical to the point of being flippant; and its cleverness is the cleverness of the editorial writer, not the poet.

A similar flattening of language and modesty of conception is evident throughout *Day by Day*. Consider this pair of lines from the poem "Ants:"

Ants are amazing but not exemplary;
their beehive hurry excludes romance.

Set off as a stanza by itself, as a sort of epigram, it is everything we require an epigram not to be—half-hearted, tired, almost banal. And what a painfully short creep of the imagination: from anthill to beehive! What a rebuke to the audacious, Metaphysical conjunctions of Lowell's early work!

"The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," from *Lord Weary's Castle*, is probably still Lowell's most famous poem. It contains these lines based on the scene in *Moby Dick* of the killing of the whale and the wreck of the *Pequod*:

The death-lance churns into the sanctuary, tears
The gun-blue swingle, heaving like a flail,
And hacks the coiling life out: it works and drags
And rips the sperm-whale's midriff into rags,
Gobbets of blubber spill to wind and weather,
Sailor, and gulls go round the stoven timbers
Where the morning stars sing out together
And thunder shakes the white surf and dismembers
The red flag hammered in the mast-head. Hide,
Our steel, Jonas Messias, in Thy side.

This maelstrom of images is fixed and focussed in the gigantic last sentence, with its triumphantly strange congress of symbols: Jonah, the whale, and the crucified, lance-wounded Christ assembling into "Jonas Messias"—one epithet for the God who is man's victim and destroyer, and man himself swallowed up in his self-destructive viciousness.

Compare this with the two lines from "Ants" quoted above. If there is a scale of poetic imagination, surely these utterances lie at opposite ends of it. To go any further in one direction would be to descend to the flat, unfigurative plane of expository prose; to go further in the other, to climb into a grotesque frenzy of figures.

In his introduction to *Lord Weary's Castle* Allen Tate wrote, "[Lowell's] style is bold and powerful, and [his] symbolic language often has the effect of being *willed*." In his review of the same book Leslie Fiedler said, "[The Baroque style's] shrill assertion that complication is the essence of pattern, *will* the spring of creation, its profusion of free detail all inform Lowell's verse." The italics are Tate's and Fiedler's. Lowell's early poetry, then, was unmistakably, ferociously willed. There is an astonishing gap between it and the verse in *Day by Day*, so much of which seems the product of an inert artistic will and a docile imagination. (I should make it clear that I think Fiedler's original objection carries a lot of weight, and that the strenuously willed and often forced character of Lowell's poetry made him a much more limited poet than one would guess him to have been from following the course of his fame in the newsmagazines. In fact Lowell's imagination remained essentially Baroque through the several phases of his career; even in his later, post-*Life Studies* work he constantly indulged his fondness for strange figures, for things yoked only by violence. *Day by Day*, I submit, is his first book not to bear any marked impression of that sort of straining. Lowell was never a *natural* poet in the sense that, say, Karl Shapiro is. One need only turn from any of Lowell's books to Shapiro's splendid, underrated "Adam and Eve" to see the sort of art Lowell was absolutely incapable of.)

Lowell has provided his own justification for his new style at the end of *Day by Day* in a poem called "Epilogue." It strikes me as the best thing in the book; and this in itself is perhaps symptomatic of the poet's slackened will—like so much contemporary art, Lowell's latest and last poetry is far more interesting in principle than in execution. Nevertheless "Epilogue" is very fine:

...Sometimes everything I write
with the threadbare art of my eye
seems a snapshot,
lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,
heightened from life,
yet paralyzed by fact.
All's misalliance.
Yet why not say what happened?
Pray for the grace of accuracy
Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination
stealing like the tide across a map

to his girl solid with yearning.
 We are poor passing facts,
 warned by that to give
 each figure in the photograph
 his living name.

The last four lines are intensely moving, more so now that Lowell himself is dead. But notice what a deeply passive esthetic is here proposed. The poet *prays* for the grace of accuracy, stands back and hopes that his facts will assemble themselves gracefully in the reader's mind. There is, of course, nothing particularly new about this method. Something very like it was suggested by Ezra Pound in his Imagist manifesto of 1912, and later elaborated by Louis Zukofsky and the Objectivists, who took their cue from Williams. But these are not writers who could have had much influence on Lowell so suddenly and late in his career. I would suggest instead that the flat, fragmentary, anti-poetic quality of the poetry in *Day by Day* is the logical culmination of Lowell's particular autobiographical mode.

I have been nervously surrounding the term "confessional" with quotation marks because it seems to me, for all its common acceptance, a quite inadequate and somewhat condescending designation for this style. The word reminds me of a particular sort of woman's magazine read mostly by truckdrivers' wives; but even if it did not carry this suggestion it would be a feeble description for the best such poetry written by Lowell or Sylvia Plath. And from a historical viewpoint it is quite possible to argue for Yeats as the first "confessional," or for that matter any of the egocentric Romantics, or the Shakespeare of the Sonnets.

But our contemporary "confessionals" differ from these older autobiographers in their unremitting focus on mental illness and on other, duller types of personal pain—the adult's Freudian ambivalence of feeling toward his parents, the misery of aging, the small, ordinary, corroding humiliations and frustrations of life. They are obsessed, that is, with all the things that constrict and cripple the self. I believe that a poet who is profoundly and honestly obsessed with these things will eventually be unwilling or unable to practice his art.

The poet is primarily the man of aggressive imagination; he seizes the world by metaphor. This is, to put it baldly, his job, the thing we require him to do in our behalf. But to do it he needs to be convinced, consciously or unconsciously, of his own largeness, of his world-embracing breadth. He needs to have something of the faith of Theodore Roethke that

A man faced with his own immensity
 Wakes all the waves, all their loose wandering fire.

But in *Day by Day* Lowell has arrived by way of his Catholic-radical pessimism and numberless skirmishes with madness at the conviction that he is nothing but a passing fact; and so he can sit in the countryside and see only

horse and meadow, duck and pond,
 universal consolatory
 description without significance,
 transcribed verbatim by my eye.

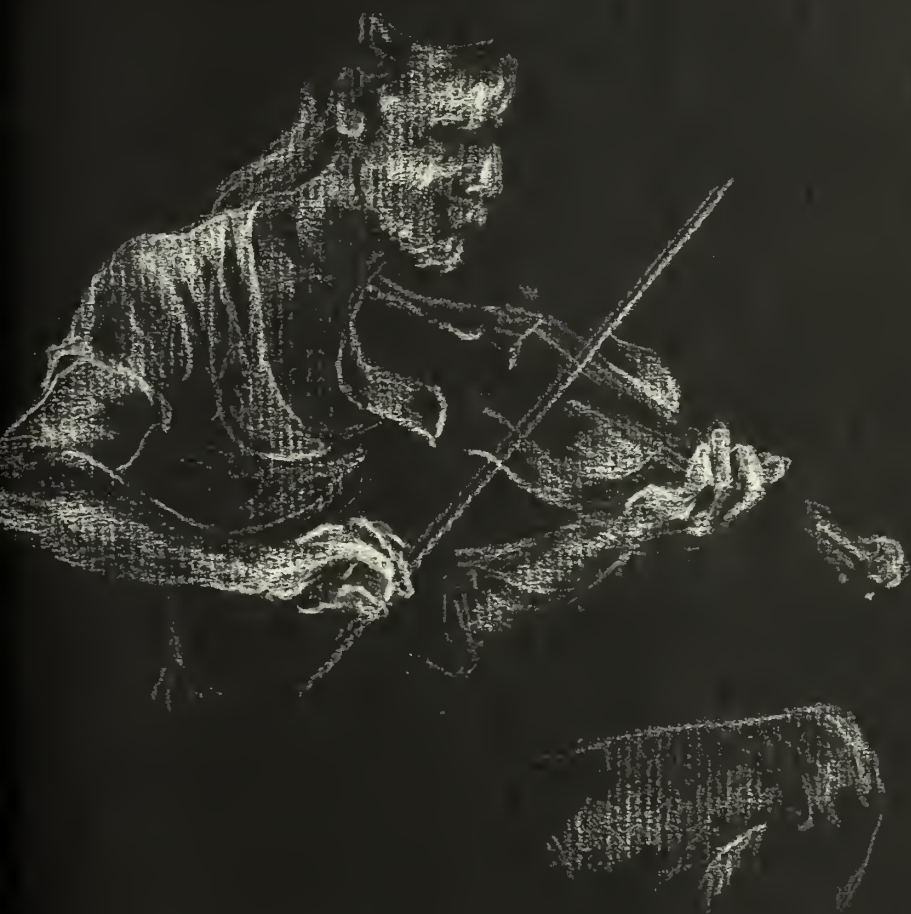
(“Shifting Colors”)

In the same poem Lowell signals his ultimate weariness by congratulating Mallarmé for having had “the good fortune/to find a style that made writing impossible.”

Yet it was Mallarmé, that least “confessional” of poets, who, in his tribute to Poe, offered this definition: the poet is the one whom eternity changes at last into himself. Robert Lowell was not about to wait; in his last book especially he is defiantly, nakedly himself in the present of his poems. Despite the fragmentary beauty of some of the writing here, I feel entirely safe predicting that these poems will not long outlive their author. Indeed one wonders how many of them should have been published at all; a large proportion are addressed straightforwardly to Lowell’s friends and members of his family, and filled with personal references which are trivially, unjustifiably obscure even to a reader quite familiar with the poet’s biography. In deciding to leave his figures undelineated by anything more than their living names Lowell abandoned the traditional effort of poetry — to make those names live.

Lowell’s legacy is secure. *Lord Weary’s Castle* and *Life Studies*, many of the translations, and much of *For the Union Dead* and *History* are already organic parts of the body of our literature. But the poems in *Day by Day* will not last, and what should sadden us is that they were not meant to.

— Michael K. Stanford





Notes on Contributors

Suzanne Ausnit is a 1977 graduate of Duke.

Laura Blum, a junior in Trinity College, is studying art therapy.

William Brown, a senior in Trinity College, was a winner in the 1977 Anne Flexner Contest.

Peter Burian is a professor of classical studies at Duke whose work has appeared in previous *Archives*.

Melinda Cowen is an employee at Duke Hospital.

Julie Deal is a senior from Houston, Texas.

Elon Eidenier, manager of The Gothic Bookshop, has published a book of poems entitled *Sonnets to Eurydice*.

Caroline C. Ford, a Trinity College senior, is majoring in English and French.

Edward M. Gomez is a Trinity College junior majoring in philosophy, political science, and design. He is currently finishing a series of original drawings illustrating Evelyn Waugh's novel *Vile Bodies*.

Nina Gordon, a sophomore from Hollywood, Florida, is majoring in public policies and economics.

Anne Gregory is a senior majoring in English and studio art.

Sandy Hingston, a senior in Trinity College, received first prize in the 1977 Anne Flexner Contest.

Jeff Humphries, a 1977 graduate now studying at Yale, won last year's Academy of American Poets' Prize.

Kenneth King is a senior in Trinity College.

Susan Lieberman, a Trinity College senior and Arts editor of *The Chronicle*, was a winner in the 1977 Anne Flexner Contest.

Wendy Lubetkin is a Trinity College sophomore majoring in comparative literature.

Anne Morris is a poet from Kalamazoo.

John Ray is a senior who studies some German and comes from a small town in Florida.

Kathryn L. Reiss is a sophomore who supports the theory that melodrama is on the way out.

Herman Salinger is a retired professor of German and comparative literature.

Elizabeth Samuell is a sophomore from Dallas, Texas majoring in psychology and art.

Haun Saussy was born in Nashville, Tennessee and is here to study the classics.

Lisa Schick, a Trinity College sophomore from New Jersey, is art editor of *The Archive*.

Mitzie Seaton is a junior from Barrington, Illinois majoring in design.

Jewell Smith is an employee at Duke Press.

Michael K. Stanford, a former *Archive* editor, received an honorable mention in the Academy of American Poets' Contest.

Amy Zlotsky is a junior from Tolland, Connecticut.



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-Henry Ward Beecher



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The
Archive

THE ARCHIVE

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The Salesgirl in the Mirror Shop

dedicated to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

With a bit of white wine in a hand-sized German beer bottle
and a thousand white stars spinning high
above the tall, lean windows I fell to sleep. About
my corpse the grounds were still, the buildings growing
old, grey oaks dropping acorns on the sidewalks, shiny-cheeked babes.
Some heels clacked homeward while the lamps were still low.

When I woke
again the sun was sweating.
His hands were searching my room, his thirst
lapping my wine. I lay long with this lover, this robber
and I too arose

 autumn-deep into the calendar
 unshadowed on the dial
stretching arms the trees shook chills away
they perched like sunning ravens
on my unbastioned shutters.

fall to muttering winter's near I said
to the glass in the bathroom, water dripping from my face onto
my breasts, water wrenching itself from shrieking pipes.
I watched the ruddy students
stepping off the walks onto
the greens. I stood there naked for such a long time.
Whittle away the day. Knives of the mind
glimmered and so, I hesitated once more, only slightly
and began to take on my clothes.

And so it was
a fine day. Balls up and down in the air,
colored signs flapping on the gates.
Winding my way to walk the coastline carnival,
gulls and snap-dragons
blowing about the drawers snapping and jangling
the jingles women were singing
snapping green beans in the middle field.
Tomatoes smashed against crates
open tables spilling bananas and mangoes while the monkey
shook his fist and prissed in his cage,

striped tellers barked tickets
the cinnamon-haired, white aproned girl
roasted peanuts and iced the fish.
Dogs were loping, cats trotting their hungry intent.

I stooped to pick up the pennies
a clown tossed on his late way
to the arena mid-day show.
So came to buy a mango and
upward wandered the street.

Shop windows.
Triangular arrays of jewelry.
Paper-collared candies in offrance boxes.
Skis and clubs, balls and sleds in still-life dance with one another.

Then I looked into the mirror shop
and saw the salesgirl watching the clock
as any student on a latening Saturday.
Watched her eyes come down restlessly
and fall like russet apples onto me in the many mirrors.

I went in to return them to the cellar
where they sweeten the air, taste the best
and asked about the mirrors.
"the gold-wrought ones" she sang, "the long ones,
the hand pieces, the door-fitted"
and looked at me.

"The wind swept my hair back on the coastline
carnival where I've been
and the mango juice clung to my skin
and I came out of a thousand-starred night
to come this way, a night I began at the university
and toasted with glasses of wine."

She nodded, "Yes I know, I've seen you there"
and stopped
and went on
"We've mirrors for the daylight
and mirrors for the night..."

Blushing deeply,
I turned away.



The Dream Question: What is this Magic You Weave?

Mages may not dominate powers.
From eager and reluctant alike,
the body-vessel pours out blessing—
providential.

For an empty cup may never fill
or, overflowing, may squander itself
across generous acres of making.

You dream of me? Powers wander me
into your dream. Whose domain?
Gift of mutual magic we meet
and exchange,
Pouring from dream into the distance
between our places of waking.



Restorations

I

A space-warp has held this place of surrender,
The valley's soft folds a wrinkle in time.
Air arcs over like glass of a snow globe.
Houses trail shadows in the sun's quick current:
As if souls staked down by picket fences.
Upstairs windows are slow with the light,
So that the sights pass through from a century ago.
Ghosts in ruffles hear harnesses, cavalry.
Why leave old wood to weather and chalking?
The past we dream was never present—
So peg joists again to the heart-pine sills,
Tend lawns before Virginia's columns, under oaks
Grown gracious with their hundred summers, in still air
Preserved as in museums. This fiction is a part
Of the story, an action our hearts complete:
As gold buds prefigure the colors which autumn
Is to realize. As defeat rounds stories of heroes,
When frost flowers leaves like their wounds.

II

Grass seals perfectly into lawns. Soldiers' last
Words are their names made decorous by limestone.
We interview the gravestones, markers, decipher
Toward an authentic text, collating
These variant readings of a work by a master.
Ashley and *Lawson* in the strict white rows.
Then breastworks. Till figures sound a drumhead sod:
Inverted below into their separate dimension.

III

Interpreting skirmishes, marches, we read
The beginning of the end, that marginal gloss
Which shines over weariness not all our invention.
In the retreat which began on a Passion Sunday,
Sayler's Creek brings Lee near despair.
A soldier from Virginia: "Appomatox and Gethsemane
Will always mean the same thing to me."

That spring's flooded streams come clear to the sight.
Blue columns form toward the Appomatox river.
The gray files between. Stacks a harvest of rifles.



The Long Ago She Bird Rises

Cold, merciless cold outside, the cold of a deep gray winter's day. Simon bought flowers from a ragged flower woman at the entrance to Paddington station. One single thoughtless motion upon seeing the woman planted in everyone's way murmuring "Flowers, lady, flowers, sir," one motion, his hand drawing money from his pocket and exchanging it for a tissue-encircled bouquet. "For the one you fancy, sir?" Fancy. "Yes." Nearby people who witnessed the transaction took vicarious pleasure in the purpose of his purchase and smiled generously. "Pretty flowers for a pretty lady," said the ragged woman. More goodwill smiles. He nodded to them shortly and moved away.

Pretty flowers for a pretty lady. Thirty-four years old, an actor portraying lovers of all kinds for ten of those years, husband for eight, father for five, and yet to fumble for a coin to buy a platform ticket, literally trembling and squeezing the flowers in agony, dropping the coin unnerved by the thought of facing a young woman who would soon step off a train for no other reason than to meet him, and now to find himself crawling on the filthy boot-scarred floor of the station to retrieve his last piece of change. The railway attendant guarding the platform gate had been observing him. "What's your hurry, sir? Train's not due in for a quarter of an hour." He colored deeply, pulled himself together enough to buy a platform ticket and replied, "S'all right. I'll wait." "Whatever suits you, Romeo."

Romeo! He laughed aloud. Callow Romeo of thirty-four years. The absurdity of the situation, of he, the actor who hesitated a moment before executing a director's command to kiss an actress almost as if to publicly apologize for his inadequacy which the recipient of his kiss must bear for the sake of the performance, waiting clownishly, impatiently for a woman he hardly knew. *Hardly* knew? She was a total stranger. He scarcely had proof she existed outside his mind. He hadn't even a name to distinguish her from every other woman on the train to pull in on track seven. A few shadowy recollections of a woman shivering in a drafty corridor promising to meet him at a London station which could easily be nothing more than bits of a dream he had unknowingly savored and embroidered brought her to life.

She would not step off that train to receive his offering of wilted flowers and he, having searched for her among the rush of people arriving from Birmingham - Oxford - Didcot - Reading, would have to walk saddened, crushed, shamefully past the railway attendant and flower woman waiting to see a pretty woman at his side. She would not come. Yet the memory of her voice made him ache.

Odd thing about the voices of women in retrospect: they all sounded the same, that same penetrating timbre. Women calling to him. His wife, her voice, a penetrating timbre, above the din of the station he could hear it, a penetrating timbre even before she knew his name.

"You!"

"Who? Me?"

"Yes, you. Who else? Look at me." Simon squinted into the darkness. A camera flashed. For years, it seemed, the flash of Lou McCallan's camera would blind him. The photo of Simon, caught off guard on the stage of a university theater, searching ahead of him for the source of a strange voice, later found its way after he and Lou were married to a spot above their sofa in their sitting room. The most prominent place in their home, then, displayed the picture of a young man badly dressed, dazed, despairing, resentfully acknowledging his viewer, a portrait so perfectly illustrative of the exact situation in which Lou found him one night when he was twenty-four that it pained him to look at it. At Lou's insistence it hung there ostentatiously, a reminder of the day she leaped from her monkey-like perch on an auditorium seat and ran to him.

"What's the matter?" she demanded. A wiry compact woman, sharp features and short curly black hair, not pretty, materializing from nowhere. "Relax!" Show's over for the evening. You look all worried."

"Hmm? Worried? Oh, sorry. Just thinking."

"I was just about to go backstage to look for you."

"For me? Why?"

"You were marvelous. Best Tesman I've seen in ages." Simon shrugged. "No, really, I've been through enough productions of *Hedda Gabler* to know. You handled Tesman beautifully. I must tell Herbert Loch about you."

"Herbert Loch? Do you actually know him?"

"You see? I would know a good Tesman. I work for him. He's doing a production of *Julius Caesar* in Leeds. We're casting at the moment...major roles have been done but now there are all those bit parts left, so I'm on the hunt for talent. Thought I'd have a look at *Hedda* even if it is a student production, seeing as there's not much else in this cultural wasteland. You're not a member of Equity yet, are you?"

His face fell. "No..."

"Not to worry. There can be a few non-Equity actors in the cast. Look, I'll try and arrange an audition for you. Have you a number where you can be reached?"

He gave her the number of the pay telephone in the boarding house where he lived. "You were the best of the lot," she said, scribbling the number on a crumpled program. "Well, I'm off. I'll ring you tomorrow."

He didn't expect to hear from her, but the following day there was a knock on his door. "Telephone, Holmes carr." He hurried to the receiver. "Hello?"

"I fixed up an interview for you."

"Is this Lou Mc..."

"McCallan. Yes. Herb will see you tomorrow morning at 11:00."

"Tomorrow at 11:00? That's terribly short..."

"Now listen, you must prepare five minutes of classical verse plus your usual bit."

"Sorry?"

"Five minutes of classical verse, doesn't matter what it is as long as you do it well...we'll have to work on it probably...and then your usual audition piece."

"I don't...uh...have one actually."

"What do you mean? Don't you have a standard piece you could use for auditions?"

"Well, no, I'm afraid not. There are things I could use, that I know by heart."

"I see. We'll have to pull something together. This is going to be a very long night—I'll come round in a few hours to coach you after you've had time to memorize the verse."

He thanked her clumsily, gave her the address, and returned to his room to consult a volume of Shakespeare. As promised, she arrived two hours later with a bag containing books, a jar of instant coffee, and a bottle of milk.

"What have you prepared?" she asked, dumping the contents of the bag on his bed.

" 'Friends, Romans, countrymen.' "

"Oh dear God—why that?"

"I thought it'd be safer to choose something well known from *Julius Caesar*."

"Safe? You're mad! Herb's got himself an Antony, darling—Peter Murray—and although you gave an impressive performance last night, I shouldn't try competing. Besides, it's unimaginative. Choose something more obscure."

"But I know 'Friends, Romans, countrymen.' And I like it."

"Yes, you and five hundred other aspiring actors. No, it won't do. Whatever you choose, it will need work and we haven't got that much time. I don't want you put in the mob scene but with your thick Yorkshire tongue, that's what Loch will think of first, if he thinks of you at all. No, find something else." She pushed a stack of books into his arms. "Come on, time is short."

They worked until 3:00 a.m. rehearsing a speech from *Henry V* and a monologue from a modern play. "Do you know where you're going tomorrow?" Lou quizzed as she gathered up the books, preparing to leave.

"Yes, I think so. Will you be there?"

"Possibly. Don't be late. Treat Loch with deference—he thrives on it...and watch your 'u's."

"My 'u's?"

"Yes, you pronounce them like a true Yorkshireman, very quaint...'ooo'...'oogly'...'booter'...what do you have 4:00?"

"A cup of tea, Henry Higgins."

"Ah coop ah tay, Eliza Doolittle," she mimicked sarcastically. "A cup of tea." He tried the phrase again.

"Simon, you've got to rid yourself of that Northern accent unless you want to play the provinces your whole life. Your accent is positively classic. Now again, what do you have at 4:00?"

"For God's sake, where I come from, no one has a proper tea anyway. The men don't clock off from the Pits till past 4:00."

"The Pits? The coal mines?" she implored with laughter. "Are you from a family of coal miners or something?"

Coal miners. Yes. Mining, that noisy trade. The clanking of the Yorkshire coal mines, the clanking of the London train station, metal against metal, now blending and above it all Lou's voice, laughing, mingling with years of noise, tearing at something within him, another voice perhaps...

"Simon Holmescarr."

"Yes, missus."

" 'Present,' not 'yes.' "

"Present, missus."

"Haven't I a name?"

"Present, Mrs. Draper."

"Why are your eyes closed, Simon?"

The sun, Mrs. Draper, the sun was in his eyes. He stood in the gymnasium in a patch of sunlight staked out for warmth. "I don't know, Mrs. Draper," but Mrs. Draper, hugging her wool cardigan around her, had lost interest in him.

He dreaded Movement, physical education at the junior school when the children stripped down against the winter air to their undergarments, boys and girls together in the freezing classroom, and stepped their white boney legs into blue athletic shorts. And formed two rows, one for girls, one for boys, and marched in silence to the gymnasium where when Mrs. Draper barked their names they sprung into action, barefoot on the tile floor. Headstands, somersaults, toe-touches, cartwheels. In rhythm, in orderly evenly-spaced rows. "Fill in the spaces!" the teacher cried periodically. "Fill in the spaces! Simon, don't lag behind."

Movement ended at noon. Again they formed rows but this time it was different, not separated by sex. "Those staying for dinner, to the left. Those going home, to the right." Simon went to the right but he would not go home. In order to stay for the government-funded dinners, the meatpies and steaming potatoes and hot custard puddings, one had to pay Mrs. Draper a stack of gray shillings on Friday of the previous week. But there were more Holmescarr children than gray shillings so they wandered around the schoolyard at dinner hour provoking fistfights and tormenting the rabbits in the first year pupils' hutch. Simon, the most thin-lipped of the thin-lipped Holmescarrs, hung back. He was a first year pupil, liked the rabbits, and often hid from his brothers and sisters in the bushes beneath the teachers' lounge at dinnertime. Shivering jacketless in his customary spot, he waited with eager curiosity for the conversation to turn to him. "Mrs. Draper, do you want sugar in your tea?" Lydia, the fat practice teacher. "One sugar? And Mr. Davis, what about you?" "Two sugars, Lydia." The headmaster's voice. "Tell me, love, how are you managing with Margaret's flock?" "Oh, quite well, Mr. Davis. Mrs. Draper has a very disciplined class." "No Holmescarrs in the lot, then?" A general titter. "Yes, indeed—Simon, but he's rather sweet. Very manageable." A feminine murmur of agreement. "Yes, he is manageable, he just smells dreadful." Scattered giggles. "Oh, Mr. Davis, how cruel." "But it's true!" Mrs. Draper. "The same dirt shows up day after day—he's not had a bath in weeks." "Well, Margaret, why not bathe him yourself?" "For God's sake, that's hardly part of my job. And where on earth could I bathe him? In the lavatory? His bum wouldn't fit into that tiny basin!" "But, Mrs. Draper, he has a very small bum!" The teachers laughed, Mrs. Draper, who never laughed in class, laughed loudest of all. A penetrating timbre rising above the hissing Paddington trains, Simon could still hear her, an echoing high-pitched laugh like the sound of...visual images escaped him but sounds he collected

like dust and could not shake off...sounds of the day his brother Tom had found him reading on the Bridlington beach.

"Simon! Simon! Don't yah wanna swim? What's that yah got? A book? But you're on holiday. Fancy you with a book when you're on holiday."

But he held fast to the book, letting the incantatory power of the words hypnotize him then during Pit Week, the coal miners' holiday, hypnotize him now waiting for a train, the phrases drifting through his head...*there was only this perfect sympathy of movement, of turning this earth of theirs over and over to the sun, this earth which formed their home and fed their bodies and made their gods...*

Simon had stolen a copy of *The Good Earth* from the half-blind owner of the bookshop where he worked. The Pearl Buck novel, his first private possession, hidden in a hand-me-down valise and dragged to the drab Yorkshire resort, saved him from the tedium of Pit Week, hours and hours of lying on coarse sand and wading in cold salty waves, evening strolls on the crowded boardwalk to buy postcards...*Some time, in some age, bodies of men and women had been buried there, houses had stood there, had fallen, and had gone back into the earth. So would also their house, some time, return into the earth, their bodies also. Each had his turn at this earth...* The good earth, the bamboo shoots, the incense, the mules, the babies wrenched in anguish from the body of a dutiful wife. The good earth. Cramped rooms rented in a cheap seaside boarding house, smokey pubs, girls with powdered acne. What had he seen of the earth in sixteen years that bore any resemblance to the earth of the Chinese farmer and his bovine wife?

...he lay upon his bed and watched the woman who was now wholly his own...here was this woman rising from his bed as though she had risen every day of her life... "Simon, ever have one?" Simon looked at his brother puzzled. "Have what?"

"A woman, mate, a woman. Jeez, I know without asking. I'll get you one. I know a nice little tart, that one at the coffee bar next to the King's Arms. I'll ask her if she fancies a fuck with my little brother."

Simon offered no protest. Perhaps it was meant to be that way, now, in this fashion, just as the Chinese farmer Wang Lung had gone to the House of Hwang for a woman when it was time for him to take a wife. Simon's time.

At the appointed hour and to the appointed place he went, horrified the girl hardly noticed him sitting at the designated table choking down a teacake while waiting for her waitressing shift to end. She yawned and scuffed her feet along the boardwalk, not asking his name, not telling him hers enroute to her room, lifeless, disorderly, above a grocery. "I'll have a smoke first." She lit a cigarette and with one flex of her hand, undid the row of snaps down the front of her uniform. The room, it smelled of the grocery below, and of the girl, too, perhaps, her tangled dull hair and blood-spotted panties kicked aside. She stretched out casually on the bed atop a snarl of grayed sheets.

He lay quivering, every nerve of his flesh awake. And when, after a long time, the room went dark, and there was the slow, silent, creeping movement of the woman beside him, an exultation filled him fit to break his body... "Well, carry on. What's the matter?"

"Your cigarette. Don't you want to finish it?"

"Afraid of my fag? I won't burn you, silly thing! Off with your trousers." Sick from the teacake, the cigarette smoke in the humid room, the unclean

mustiness of the sheets, he obeyed her, his flesh quivering from the sting of the fiery butt, his lip bitten till he tasted blood to hold back vomit, his ears ringing painfully from the sound of her occasional harsh laughter.

The train was edging toward him on track seven. Deafening as it wormed its way into its slot, it gave a loud snort, a screech, then settled itself with a steady hum. Doors banged open, people emerged, well-dressed, poorlydressed, hurrying, distracted, a few met by people waiting on the platform. One woman bound in sausage-tight jeans and tall leather boots jumped directly from the train onto the platform, bypassing the steps. Like Lou. Restless sinewy limbs always in motion seeking something, a coiled spring threatening to release itself. Lou had to be restrained, held back from her reckless unleashing of self-destructive energy. He shuddered to see the woman in jeans and boots leap from the train: it was Lou in an underground station the day she agreed to marry him. Enroute to a northern suburb to visit her parents, they stood with linked arms anticipating the appearance of a train from the black-mouthed tunnel, their low conversation trapped in the muggy air by dirty curved tile walls littered with peeling advertisements. A faint rumble sounded distantly.

"Thank god," muttered Lou as she hopped impatiently from one booted foot to the other. "I thought it'd never come."

"Darling, it's been but five minutes," said Simon.

"Seems like an eternity." She strode to the edge of the platform and leaned over.

"Careful, Lou."

"Don't be silly. I like to watch it rush out of its hole."

"Mind the edge. You could be thrown off by the vibration."

The rumble increased to a powerful roar. When Lou bent over further, Simon moved towards her. "All right, enough of this. Get away from there," he pleaded, trying to compete with the steadily mounting noise of the train and the rising gust of wind. Suddenly, as a beam of light pierced the blackness of the tunnel, Lou crouched slightly and pushed herself forward towards the wide gulf beyond.

"Lou!" Simon shrieked, seizing her with a furious yank and hurtling the two backwards just before a red train burst from the tunnel and whipped past them. "Jesus Christ! What was that for? You nearly got yourself killed."

"That's the point," giggled Lou lightly, running her fingers through her rumpled hair.

"Laugh will you?" He gripped her shoulders tightly.

"Oow, you're hurting me."

"Well, you hurt *me*."

"Let me go."

"Not until you explain why you did such a silly thing."

"I used to do that when I was a child."

"Throw yourself in front of trains? Delightful child."

"I would just pretend to. Like holding your breath till you turn blue. No little girl ever died doing that but it gives one's mother a fright. I used to try to jump in front of the Tube when I was with the au pair girl."

"I don't think it's the least bit amusing. It's suicidal."

"You're wrong, Simon darling. There's always someone to catch you."

"Oh, nonsense, you know that's not true."

"If they love you, they'll catch you. The au pair girl adored me, more than she did my brother and sister, I think. I never attempted it with my mother. Too risky. But you're safe."

"You've had your fun with me, so there'll be no more of it, do you hear?"

"Cheeky today, young man. I didn't know it was in you," she said smiling slyly. He grabbed her by the arms and squeezed fiercely. "I mean it—never again. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you...please don't be angry anymore. Act as you always do...nice...lovely to be with...lovely to look at...such a fine face and a fine voice...I love to look at you, do you know that?"

Yes, he knew that very well, that she loved to watch him, study his every word and movement. The attention she lavished on Simon moved the young man for she seemed obsessed with a physical beauty he had not known he possessed. Her constant attention nurtured a vanity in him and he took to standing before a mirror reciting poetry or dramatic monologues, relishing his own facial expressions and the richness of his voice.

Lou draped her arms around his neck. "Why do we have to spoil the day by going to my parents? Shall I ring them and say I'm not feeling well?"

"If you like." Overheated in a raincoat and a suit, he held her closely. For a long time they stayed in the middle of the underground station whispering lines from the play in which Herbert Loch had given Simon a small part while trains came and went, opening and closing their doors for the young couple to no avail.

She was like that, Lou, moody. When quiet, more restive than calm. Only that day in the underground station where they had stood for nearly an hour amusing onlookers in their haphazard, self-absorbed murmuring, had she been relaxed, her small body resting easily against his, the tension and struggle as though she were running from something gone.

She was a fox. He was a hare. They were pursued by the hound, by Loch, covetous of their talents, eager to possess them both, give life, take life from the two. The faster they ran the more deftly Loch took possession of them. He could, for he knew the right people. No. Not that simple. He was the right person. This Simon grew to loathe. Vain man. Made Lou sleep with him before hiring her. Admit her to his clique. Changed her from no one to someone. Did the same for Simon when he married Lou. And now Simon wanted to escape, thought more and more of the quiet bookseller whose copy of *The Good Earth* he had never returned. When he told Lou his idea for a bookshop, she just stared incredulously, as if his words were treasonous. "What? Are you mad? With Loch wanting you for his pet roles more and more?"

A voluble man, Loch. Full of himself, of his fame, rave reviews, hopeful actresses swooning for parts. Full of his Oxford son, a campus leader, incidentally a promising playwright. But Simon had a son as well, David, five, too young to speak much of. His best friend lately. He ached happily when the

boy occasionally followed him to rehearsals during school holidays. Whiney little voice, "Dad," annoyed the other actors but Simon did not care. Neither did Loch, oddly. Never objected to the disruptive presence of the child. Odd. He objected to just about everything else. A peculiar affection for David, always intrigued by the child's endless prattle. Very odd considering most anyone outside his tight circle of favored actors and associates irritated him.

Simon, by virtue of his marriage to Lou, maybe because of his manipulable talent, hung peripherally about the circle. Lou, she belonged to it, Loch's indispensable elfin Lou, able to record his art with her incessant camera and singe a hostile critic in a letter to the editor with equal finesse. Lou scurrying around in taut jeans like the day she burst in on Simon taking a bath, trapping his grimace with a camera flash, laughing at his astonishment, annoyed by his embarrassment, all at once illogically angry, suddenly crying out in a bitter voice, "I'm your goddamn wife, aren't I? No wonder you're such a loner." And then slamming the door muttering something about Loch and a Yorkshire accent and bookshops and then she was gone. So quick. Unannounced. Rashly. As if leaving meant nothing. Days passed before Simon fully grasped her absence.

In desperate want of the boy's company, Simon began keeping David out of school and took him to rehearsals instead. By chance, chance which in retrospect marked a focal point in his life from which all else became clearer, they boarded a commuter train at the rush hour. There followed after Simon and David into the compartment a young woman who took the seat directly opposite them next to the window. She was entirely without fashion, this young woman, wore nothing that would distinguish her as belonging to one particular time or place; still, she was not ascetic nor ungraceful but rather so plainly lovely and out of place that he could not help staring at her.

The three, without newspapers, without briefcases, without clothes indicating serious intent, discovered themselves grouped together by the others in the compartment, isolated in their nondescriptiveness. A man and a woman and a child travelling together: it made sense to those around them and in a way it made sense to the three themselves. Clearly taken from the context of their own lives and thus estranged from the business-suited newspaper-clutching commuters for whom the train ride was a ritual occurrence, not a jarring experience, they rode as outcasts, comfortable in that condition as if their alliance were inevitable.

When the train stopped again, a woman burdened down with groceries boarded and took the only available seat beside David. The little boy observed her awhile, then remarked, "You've got lots of nice things for tea, haven't you?"

"Yes, for my children," replied the woman. "I'm sure your mother has a lovely tea waiting for you as well."

The child shook his head. "No, missus." Simon froze and fixed his eyes on the black script he held tensely. "My mum isn't home. She's left us." Simon squeezed David's arm to silence him. "Enough, Davey," he whispered, avoiding the eyes of the attentive passengers now thrown from their composure and casting judgmental glances at the father and son. Until the

train reached Waterloo, his destination, he took refuge in the unsure gaze of the young woman. When the train stopped, he bolted, pulling David after him, leaving behind his script, fully aware of his error but as one realizes an action in a dream and is powerless to alter it, he yielded to the flow of events, yielded to the natural and utterly relieving act of relinquishing it to the young woman whom he instinctively assumed would be the only one to pick it up. Yes, let her have it, keep it, free him from the bondage of Loch's production.

It had not occurred to him that the script, clearly marked with his name, would be returned. In person. To his home. Foolish to think himself rid of it so easily. Had he expected the woman to sense his desire never to lay eyes on it again? A chill ran through him the day he responded to a faint knock at the door and found her there. He did not ask her name or invite her in as if to pin her down would make her vanish. Yet he begged this anonymous woman, this girl, to come opening night, promised to leave her a ticket at the box office, and did so, a kind of buffer between himself and the rows of stony-faced critics, telling himself as he reserved it that it would remain unclaimed till moments before the show went up and then be sold to some unimportant latecomer.

He thought of that—of the ticket, of the girl with better places to go than a stuffy theater—as he waited in the wings for his entry opening night, reluctant to go on, ill with anxiety, unable to dispel the fantasy of an ally among impassive journalists and hypercritical academics in the audience. But he had no choice, had to make his entrance beneath penetrating lights, tried to focus on faces in the first few rows, spotted Herb infuriatingly close on the aisle, and felt his throat constrict until he choked on his lines, until he halted altogether and unconsciously wiped the sweat from his gummy pancaked face. Maybe she was there, too, the young woman, maybe she had claimed her red velvet seat after all and was waiting for him to finish his speech...finish the speech, dear God, the speech. Shocked by the silence he was creating, he continued, dizzily blinded to everything around him, not because of the lights bearing down on him but because of a kind of anger he suddenly felt, anger roused by having let the girl see how the stage could humble and strip him, anger which instantly dissolved when he opened the stage door and saw her waiting there in the rain, hair soggy and limp, a gnarled program stuffed into her handbag. He grasped her hand tightly to assure himself she did in fact exist outside his imagination and was relieved to feel the cold, chapped, unmysterious flesh pressed against his own.

And now today, it was as if he had blotted his commitment to the play out of his mind entirely. Instead of appearing in the matinee performance, he would just not show up, no telephone call to feign illness, no alerting his understudy, just simply abandon Loch's play. Lou would have been appalled, furious, livid, where *was* Lou? With Loch? Loch who would be irritated and affronted by his unexplained absence, throw him out of the cast, Loch to whom everything and everyone was a nuisance, except his adorable elfin Lou, and David. David. A whiney voice. "Dad." Annoyed the people at rehearsals. "Dad." Vain voluble Loch. "Dad." No, couldn't be. "Dad?" It couldn't be. "Dad!" It could not be. "Dad!" It had to be. The eyes.

"Simon?" The young woman, last off the train, stood before him smiling a

little. "Don't you recognize me." Yes, yes, it was she. Nameless, she could have been anyone, anyone or no one, just a recollection he had unknowingly savored and embroidered, the image of someone shivering in a dark corridor promising to meet him. Keeping her promise, knowing his name, speaking it eagerly in a voice nearly drowned out by the noise of the station. "Simon, is something the matter? Am I late?" He thrust the flowers at her. "Thank you. I'm so glad to see you. Simon—"

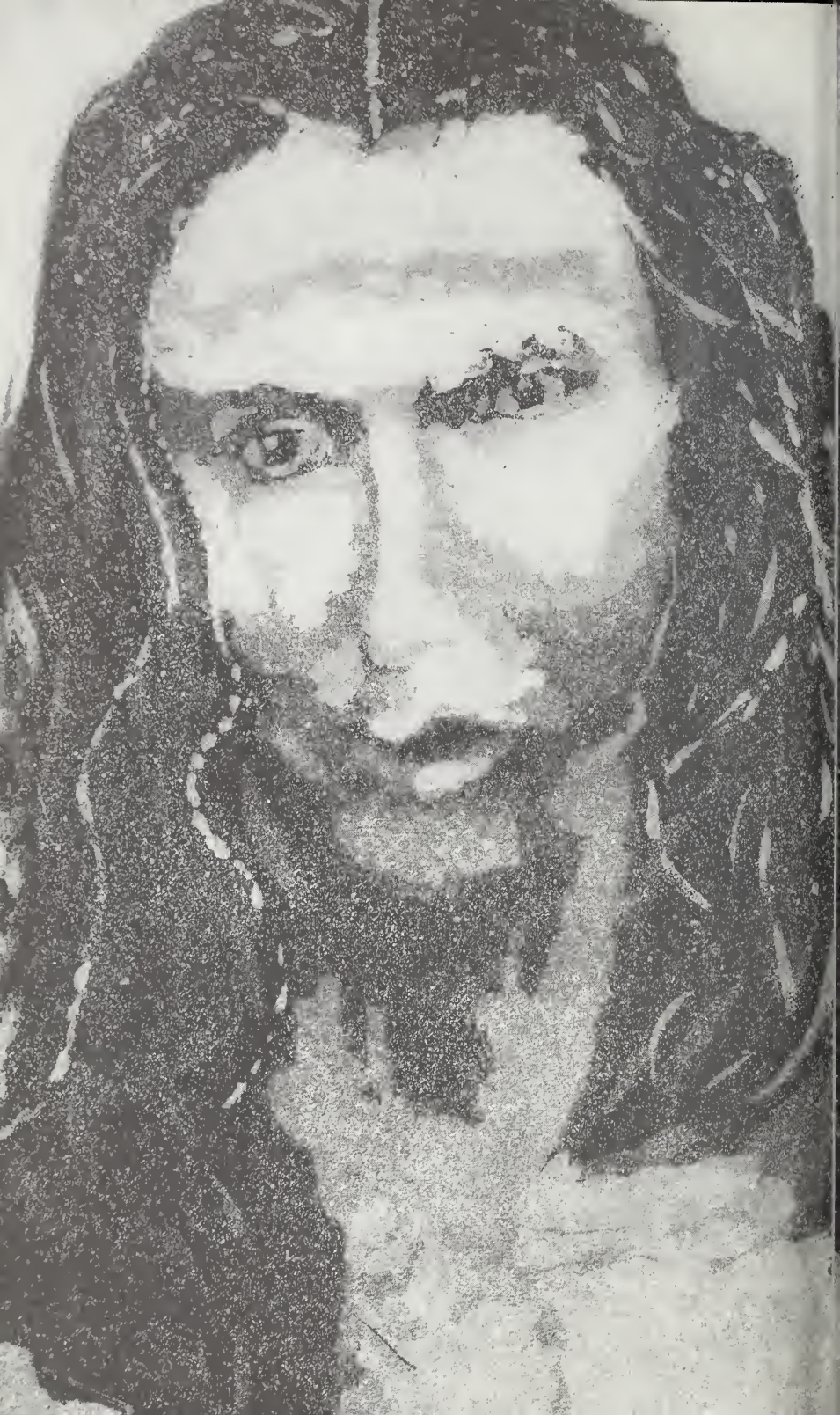
The eyes. One pair of unaccusing, undemanding eyes amid a hundred mingled voices, in unison, a chorus, a penetrating timbre beating rhythmically incessantly like a camera flashing, like the trains moving in and out of the station. He pulled her against him with force, the flowers crushed between them, and peered into her clear eyes stricken with fresh fear and confusion. Then he brought his face down to hers and kissed her, feeling a horror within him as if the kiss itself were an act of violation.

The Red Sea

From that part I could see the chariot
Drivers, redfaced, their horses in feathers
And silver. Like pompous moons they clamored
And rose to the water's edge to witness
The crossing—a darkskinned people, a
Filament stringing its way to safety.

From that part I could see the sky wafting
Blue flame to cloud those warriors' eyes,
Changing Egyptian clarity to estimation.
The towering walls made invitation:
Test this firmament, wet and deceptive.

From the opposite shore I could see the
Soldiers, their swords defiant, their strides
Long and prideful. The filament they formed
Was devoured in the waves' collapse, swallowed
By a god expert in devastations.



Through White

Always a great
striker of stances, I put on
the strangest pose of all:
standing out on the wheel of a wind-bucking Cessna,
bent forward, hands on the strut,
right leg up like a dancer stretching
or a dog pissing down three thousand feet
on the countryside shrunk to a toy.

And alert as I am to commands,
Parris-Island trained, two months a civilian,
he only has to hurl the order once
over the raving engines: *Go!*
and I'm gone, diving back
as practiced, though
I break the esthetic arch,
breast-stroking in terror, here
where my ears are sealed of every noise
and I swim in sucking white
that eats me like a sea

till canvas straps on my shoulders and under my balls
jerk me vertical, and my feet swing back where they should be.
My stomach stumbles home when I look up
to see the chute in its green bloom
bulging with a perfect breast of air; now I descend
in a slow, grave, towering silence,
watching the rising world with eyes as calm and fervent
as the sky-flashing ponds where they open
ringed with the autumn woods, with spikes of fire.

Then I think of the white I went through—
but above the green blossom is only
blue ice, firm and unshaded;
there is no cloud but a cottony
blur on the round horizon. ...

When the ground sails up I swoon
down to my hip as instructed, and roll

in the hot, crumbling smell of the field.
 I stagger to my feet, forgetting
 how to draw in the lines, betrayed
 by my unheroic hands. I fumble
 the lines toward me, heap them in a tangle
 in my arms, remembering
 a glimpse I once caught of my death
 in the hills of California, when it came on
 in the shape of mist lit with the morning light; and think:
 that is the white I fell through.

*That is the white I fell through, because
 only in childhood do our fears infest the darkness
 in their furred and looming black. Grown, what we fear is
 the stupefied staring of stars, the stillness
 of ice, emblems of the bleached
 iris of oblivion, and all the un pitying blank
 we keep failing to fill. And we carry it in us
 condensed and burning
 like the blue-white jewel of a blowtorch
 till mortal terror expands it
 to galaxies, snowstorms, cold
 mountain-mist blazing with morning, that devouring
 element at three thousand feet.*

Deserving a beer, I trudge back
 in a clumsy cloud of green nylon, legs now
 weirder to ground than a sailor's.

Later, driving
 home in the awesome clearness of autumn evening, I think
 that fall is too gentle a name for this season that has
 the flanks of the road erupting around me,
 colors of fire and the ocean furiously
 vaulting in the level light—
 like the live earth straining to frame
 an essential audacity, an answer to white.

Sagami-Otsuka

In a Jap bar away from his buddies he drinks to stub
his glowing mind out, twenty, an artilleryman, Dear Johned
just this morning, not understanding how a place can lie beyond
the maximum effective range of love.

The Seafarer

a version from the Old English
for my father

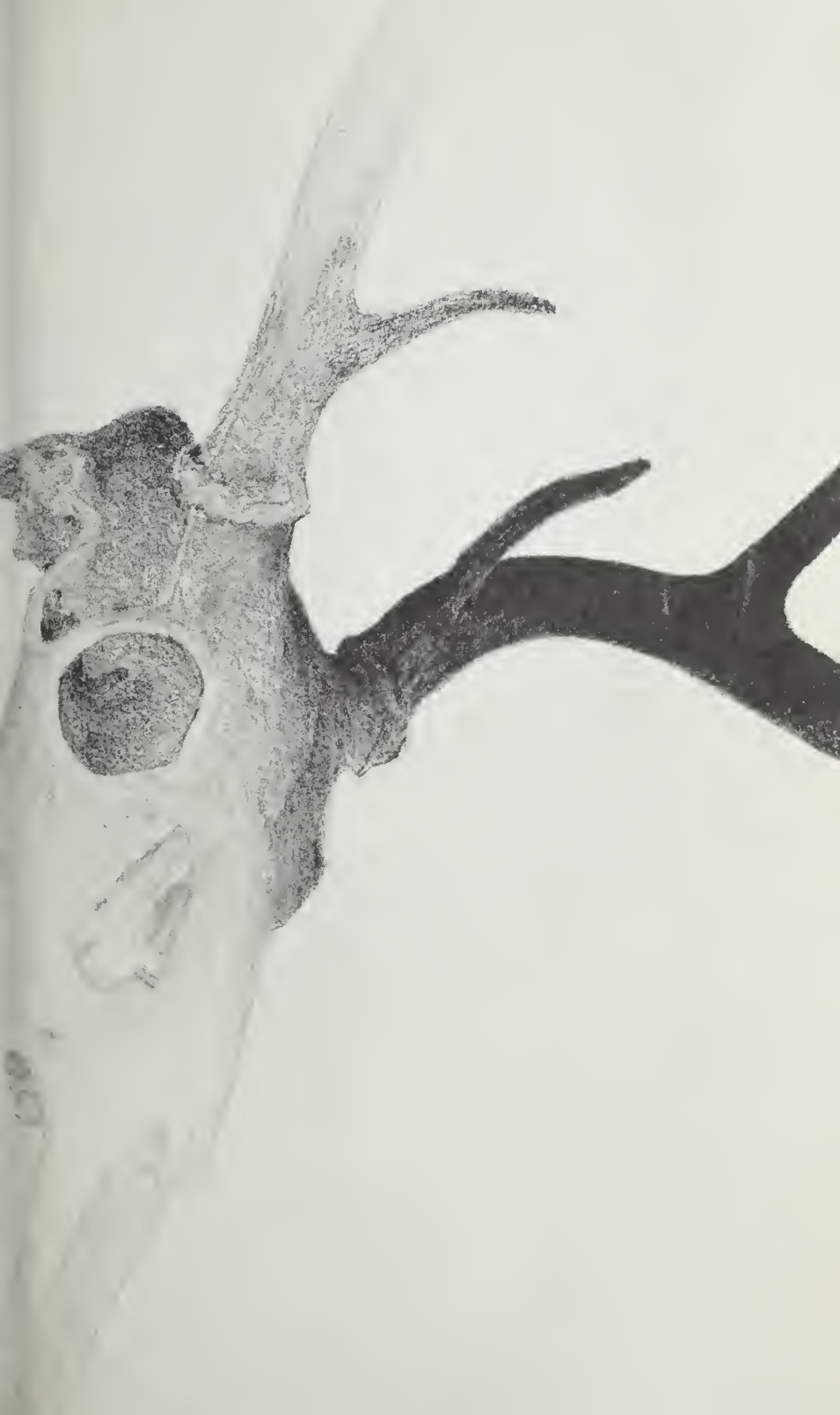
Quiet! and

I will put out your mirth with my truth, wreak
my song upon the laughter in this air—
listen: hear how bitterly I suffered
when I toiled across the leaping sea for years,
the pain I knew in the narrow halls of ships
when I drew the grim night-watch, and shuddered
all through the dark alone for my sin-heavy soul
where killing cliffs loomed against stars. My feet
were pressed white by the cold, my head and hands
squeezed in the cruel clamps of winter, though all
my shames were seething hot about my heart.
Hunger and weariness hacked me within.
The man who remains on his friend-steadied earth
will not understand how it was with me
where I drove all winter long on the desolate
back of the trackless sea, far from my folk,
harried by volleys of hail, ice gleaming
like blades on the mast, fearing the huge
slam of the waves on the quivering hull.
All day my haunted spirit strained to dream
gannet's voices into the boisterous
laughter of men, mews' singing into mead.
Breakers lumbered past us, thudding into cliffs;
the terns shrieked, ice like fire in their feathers;
and the eagle's tall yell hung on our ears
like death, there where we drifted defenseless,
no kinsmen, no country to leeward.
You who stayed back in the tall-gated cities,
proud in your houses, fresh and flushed with wine,
will never conceive how weary we were
when we wore out our hearts at the oars
on the bare, brimming plain of the sea.
Night crouched over us; snow spewed down;
ice locked the furrows of the foam;
hail whirled like the threshed wheat, colder
than all earth's grains.

Yet even now, dear Christ! deep longing pounds my heart
when I sing back those waves, set them up
in the smoky hall, see them rearing enormous
with clean, remembered sunlight. When I sit
to fat and placid meals I ache to sail
once more on the uncertain floods of time.
There is not any man so satisfied
and arrogant in owning and agile in his youth
that he never lusts to test himself for good
and prove himself to God against the ocean.
When the will to journey rises he forgets
harps' music and the tortuous gold
bracelets given by princes and the unclasped
silver thighs of his wife, and everything
but the terrible, pure strangeness of the sea.
Meadows thronged with blossoms, towns with urgent crowds,
branches streaking the air with young jade-green,
drive the feet of his dreams to the thawing harbors.
Glistening voices of birds prod him onward—
though if he stood to listen he might hear
a solitary sea-death in their music.
No soft-gutted chief can imagine
what seafaring men must endure
who take the exile's path across the world;
but still my spirit turns in tides of yearning
back to the realm whose lord is the roaming whale.
Cries of the lonely, sky-voyaging gulls
sharpen my land-dulled manhood, point me
like a weapon back to sea. I would rather
sail out forever till I come to God
than linger out a borrowed life on land.

A man on this earth is nothing lasting:
he is always taken before he expects it
by sickness or age or the edge of hatred
cutting him down while he looks away.
He can only hope to leave in his tracks
the praise of those living after, by fighting
to fame against his enemies and God's
so that his name stays armored with renown
in the minds of angels and the mouths of men.
But now the old days are departed, when the pride
of kingdoms reared the heart to towering action;
the mysterious caesars are gone, and the shining

kings are lying deep in their orphaned lands,
their cities drowsing, sagging into dust.
A weaker folk survives to take the world
and grasps it lightly, worried. Man's valor
no longer gathers glory, and earth
itself seems old. The race of men
is like a senile dreamer in a bleak
and childless house, remembering
his dark hair and his friends the sons of princes.
Wine's sweetness may no longer thunder on his tongue
nor may his slackened sinews feel real pain;
and though he sows his brothers' graves with gold
not one will stir to thank him, or return
to heave an oar beside him, shouting songs.



Salut. Je m'appelle Bottom

If love is, as I have heard,
"Longing and deprivation," then I
Am in love; but whether with you or anybody
I could not say. My

Forehead weighs against this door. For you there are
Possibilities: your own clear eyes
Reflecting a face you know, your foggy hair, glass,
Close and impossible—but I don't know this—

Or the delirious water, enfolding you,
Impossible—rolls, sounding, inflects
Your moving through it, lying, returning across you,
Infused with your color, multiplied, projected;

But behind this door I choke. The water
Begins to drain. Are you there? I could not say.
Whether or how, if I am only what I am,
You are what you are—or that you are—if so—

For me there is only you, clothing
This vast guess at nothing.



Love Spell: A Pagan Poem

(After Vergil's VIIIth *Eclogue*, Part II
and the Symphonic Poem by Charles Martin Loeffler)

A landscape: of the earth? of the heart?
Dimensions: three, four if you count time,
five if you count eternity.
Who is speaking? Whose is this incantation?
Bring what he says, soft wool and frankincense;
sprinkle the fructifying water, seminal and pure,
and burn rich herbs: marjoram, candytuft, fennel.
Then comes song, the singing that can bring
moons out of heaven. Circe entwined, enswined
the war-worn men (well, all but One) with song,
with tone and waving limbs and wafting scarves
so that they saw or thought they saw the moss
creeping between forked limbs of sycamore.
All, all the lyre-strings sang songs of home.
The arms of sweethearts and the thighs of wives
bent their heads horizontal; on all fours
they fell, and fell to grunting, bristling, bit
the nipple-pointed acorns on earth's bed
till they were turned to squealing swine in flesh.

And songs have burst the snakes by song accurst,
bane of the shepherd's meadow-bourne, utterly
burst them by singing.

Tie three threads and bring
my love to me. Tie them three times round,
made of three colors. Weave three colored knots.
"The chains of love we weave." (Bring my love home!)

The god takes pleasure in uneven numbers.
O wake love, God, out of love's winter slumbers!
Let my love melt for me as this wax melts,
harden as clay will harden. And then melt.
Sprinkle the cornmeal, kindle the pitchy pine
till pineheart crackles with its turpentine.
My love burns me. Now let love burn for me.
Bring my love to me! bring my love, my songs!
Love can turn lupine. Wolfish love can call
spirits from graves; love can move forests, fields

and charm the corn and cotton from the ground.
(Bring my love here!) Toss salt across your shoulder;
never look back. Toss burning embers, too.

Ashes awaken suddenly and flare!
Our shrines are flaming, throbbing, quivering!

Can I believe my eyes or trust my ears?
The hound is howling by the hearth. O love,
you are no dream but real. My love is here!
My songs have brought my love.

Now ends my song
and what begins, no poet, only lovers know.



A Line of Quails

This is a story about deer hunting on a foggy day. Now most of the people who go hunting, the only stories you will ever get out of them are adventurous and active, but this is really neither. Rather, it is a story of watching, and waiting, and what you feel and what you see. I think this should be told, because that is what hunting is about more than anything else; waiting, and seeing everything somehow differently while you do.

The first thing, and the hardest thing, to do is to set a place to stand for the rest of the story, to try to explain the significance of it, and to try to show the mystery. First, you are out there in the field and one of the things you think about is why aren't you in bed where it is warm, and for that matter, why ever would you level your gunbarrel and drop the hammer on some gray-brown form just because it has horns on its head, and you don't. Though you may think about it and not find a reason; still, deep inside, there is one. It is the idea that you are about to kill something, and you are drawn closer because you cannot help but reflect to your own death, and you see things as a man who is about to kill, or a man who is about to die. Death takes on a reality, and you seem to understand and feel one of the certain, one of the dependable, one of the all-unifying, real forces of life.

Well, I was supposed to tell a story. So I waited and thought out there in the fog, which was almost heavy enough to fall as dew, but not quite. Still, the grass and the leaves were wet where the freefloating water had touched them and stuck. I could see about two-hundred yards, and my eyes stretched out to that region at the limit where figures were outlined by dark gray on light gray, for that's where you see the deer first. Sometimes I would rest my eyes on the black gunbarrel I held in my right hand, down to the gunstock on my brown boot in the white sand, mixed with brown and green grass, some that the frost had got just a week past, and back out again to the gray circle's limit.

Oh sure I knew what lay beyond, I had walked all over that island, and camped all through the oak grove. To the east was the big swamp where all the cypress stands looked the same and you could get lost with a compass in broad daylight, past oak scrubs and thickets with log roads where they timbered the pine in the 'twenties. To the west it was ours, it used to be swamp, rougher than this by a long shot, although it had mostly been brought to bear crops and raise cows, as is man's will with good land. To the south was the county line and to the north was orange grove, with a good sand jeeptrack running between, which was the way out of the island. It was near this road that I stood, and listened too, for we had set out one dog that had winded trail, and now the water was beginning to drip from the oak leaves nearby, sounding like footsteps, only different in rhythm. So that was about all there was for me to do: watch and wait and listen and think about where I was.

After a while two other dogs joined our own, which was strange, but what was stranger was when they all stopped entirely. Later we found out that all three had been loaded up by someone to the north of us who stole our dog. Damn him. After a while I figured that the hunt didn't interest the deer that

day, so I walked a little, came back, and squatted down with my rifle across my knees.

Now: have you ever heard the racket that a covey of quail will make when they have just woken up, shaking out their feathers for the day and getting breakfast when they're relaxed and in no particular hurry? I heard 'em before I saw 'em, as coming through the grass, they emerged from the background at about twenty yards, making more conversation than a bunch of old women on a Sunday. Six cocks and four hens they were, and I whistled to them, and they whistled back, though they weren't fooled for long about whether I was one of them. I was just too damn big. But they had never been shot at and weren't afraid, as they went around me at no more than six feet, where I could see every fleck of color on them. Quail move much quicker than a man, in a sort of line. Their eyes are black and as live as gunpowder. One of them would always see me, so if I made any quick moves they would know it as soon as I did. I was not quail hunting today, though, imagine taking a shot, you fall down, the birds all fly away, the other hunters come running, and you have a pile of feathers where one innocent bird was blasted to kingdom come. Not me. So they went by, they tending their business which was to get breakfast before lunchtime and I tending to my own, which was to watch them and write a story about it, as they worked on down next to the high cover. One or two at a time they crossed the road I'd come in on, half running and half flying. The road went in to the camp as well as to the outside world, and I sat there listening to them, as they went on under the oak trees, scratching and talking to themselves the way quails do as the fog-water dropped from the leaves.

And now, halfway through my bourbon and water, I think about things literary. Should I have been scared to write that story for the weakness of my expression? Perhaps. But on the other hand I as the writer am still a part of that close and singular relationship between the hunter and the hunted. Instead of a rifle I now have a pencil in my hand. I am the master of the sphere, though you the reader will soon enough be hunting me, and I am both proud of my perception and its expression in words. For that is the joy of creation, in which you have to take something to make something else. We get out of our warm beds to stand in the fog, we put the ephemeral story in concrete words and in living we pull the trigger on our lives.

It is this mystery, between different things, you and I, and what I write and what I see, and the bridging of this difference by compassion, and sympathetic feelings, and one's own imagination, and even love; that calls out the hunter in all of us.

Camera Man

for Steven

His black canvas constellates
The stars in all lighted things,

Anchors shadow to the earth,
Pales where time evaporates

Into clear eternity
Of sight. Distinction is all

For the poet of pauses,
Of breaths just caught, and faces

Forever voiceless—thrumming
Welldeep in the prophet eyes

That tell us more than words can.
(The "I" of language gestures

Life through images, while he
Silently presents it whole.)

His the compassion of hands
That keep their shuttered distance,

Respectful of privacy,
Priestly laying on of eyes.

He knows we cannot worship
What imperfect hands have touched.



Three Poems

William Brown

Ballad in Byzantium

As if crouched over a stream
a worker in mosaic
glanced at himself in squares of glass—

stone by stone
he fit the faith of a race,
pieced their worship,
designed his own work.

Kneeling on Christ's robe
he touched the baptist's eyes,
white, with a circle of black
(more carefully cut) in the center,
and now staring back

—the hand still cupped
at his side
gesturing to multitudes,
fields of color bending
by the banks of the Jordan—

the accuracy of a calendar,
a correspondence with the sun,
spring to summer,
ecstatic for prince or philosopher

or a great bird
passing a miracle.

A square of pavement.

Yellow-eyed, he rose at dusk
and limped in delicate pride

In a wineshop he stood to rest,
leaned by a post
with a lintel overhead.

(Then a poet came in

and confused him
with questions.)

Once at home,
by a candle,
he thought:

Justinian asleep.
Sancta Sophia,
the dome moonlit
and precious.

He twitched in the night,
not believing Plotinus.

even a poem o'er the bride

for Marcel Duchamps

wires
glass them
 intressable

disrubing
behind ev'ning happen a open
invitortion; timelust

:aye abject, mais oduble...

share cracks
nay pox
 /
 tox like o clock.

 Chessless, 'e
will believed her able?
)bang beneath brown table(

4 O's
out. out.
 TRUE than
 the moltible

orgism:

bibon!

finely incomplete!

Recitatif

from IN SEARCH OF THE SAILOR

—for Sandy, John, and Gregg

I

Of course the bones dance

the nobs that were toes
cross the earth

and scratch
at open sores

but before we get to China
there is hell

and there we are all well kept.

2

There are voyages to be taken

Orpheus (or Rimbaud)
never really made it back

back home they still account
for any god's creation

but o we now know better
and never believe

in myths of resurrection.

3

When the water recedes
a tree is stiff in the wind
roots in the mud
wound around whatever
they can get
carcasses perhaps
a drowned man who clutched
me with him to the bottom.

4

A poet has touched all the dead
knowing them all
heading into the gales
against waves
dreading the thought of the sailor
knowing he cannot be saved
caught in another vision
revision would not have helped.

5

When the water recedes
correspondences can
no longer be trusted
at a glance the dance is tangled
unconfessed
unless someone can tell us otherwise
the eastern bird
has not been heard of in our lives.

6

The contortion cannot be cured
by the order of trance
by crossed steps in sand
(and the longer we laugh
we will never begin)
long before diving in
and what will burn in stagnant water
where life is a matter for little concern.

7

(On shore there was plenty
more than enough
though the vines did not blossom
the grapes did not fatten
and poets
lacking their viaticum
simply dried up
because silence is well understood.)

8

When the water recedes
there is driftwood
shaped like a thin wrist
twisted
fingers deep in the sand
and the salt
has never been
blessed.

9

Forget the rest

an image has at last turned up
unearthed

bone white as the horizon
only to be forgotten

by the almost insane
look *again* to water

no ninth wave ever came.

10

A stake of mangrove

has been shaken from the soil
(uncoiled from the marsh)

hardly taken for granting
granting nothing

the unspoken
chanting has ceased

the poet an unwelcome guest.

11

At best there will be no end
to our conversation
unending travel
across an ocean
we will not forget
the ark is not well made
and unexpected
stopped atop a small hill.

12

We have disgraced ourselves again
and they will never
consider us gods
but I'll know better for once
at last
now leave me to my leisure
to dig in dirt for bones
old bones buried in the back.



Unkept Mistress

ma honte est immense comme l'éternité. — Lautreamont

Descending into the bush
of intricate fibrils,
I pause over the
moist, hot flame;
lambent waves
flare and subside,
casting monstrous
shadows on the
frog skinned walls
smelling of sulphur,
old eggs...
Eros misconceived.

The flame enters
my head. Salt-
showered ground,
fertility denied.
I gasp, choking
on the thorn
which pricks my
eye,
piercing its glazed
crazed surface.
Sounds burst forth
and are absorbed into the
bowels of a ram.
Full in loin, the
roundness of centuries
rests for the
return to the natal
wire.

Ghosts fade past—
pale, dried, dusty
and dank;
driven by the voice
from above.

My son...
Beaming glance
swiftly averted,
saliva brusquely
brushed away.

Superior mother scurries
by, her belly
swollen and mottled,
contractions minutes
apart.
He quietly descends,
grey and dirty.
Swiftly he takes
her, unkept mistress of all souls.

RFD #3

Today was Sunday and no one was going to clear the dinner dishes or the few aloof ears of corn that lay dying on the porch table. The maid would not be called nor would she come; yesterday's doubleheader and this morning's box scores were left in the sports section, upstairs, right on top of last night's heaped and faded armor. Twilight's yellow ambience, which seemed to have been coming all day, was politely excusing itself. Seeing this, the pond siezed the stage; the old duet: glassy surface and sinking woods, finally dragged off by the distorting glide of swans; territoriality with the precision of a Swiss clock. The hours are no longer waves upon which the faded glories of our week's frenzy can come crashing into the present with a gust of artifice. They are wrinkles rolling under our surface, regimented successions, the order, rank and precision of file in a measureless pond—the unvarying pitch of the same song, sung every Sunday. Like a conductor, holding his crescendo through the second, third and fourth movements, you could maintain your pitch, challenging the fiendish gesticulations of the traffic cop, misdirecting all avenues heading towards the white house, the small pond and the soothing catharsis of weekends in the country.



Rolling Home

"Nicholas!" sang the tall woman, waving. "Oh, Nicky, just look. Is it me?" She ran down the center aisle towards the director, wearing a silver costume cut low and tight, with a peculiar gauzy train at the back. "I'll have a tiara and do something with this ghastly hair, but look. You like?" And posing, she gave him rapidly a left view, a right view, and reaching him turned and threw an arm about his waist.

"Janie just brought it, and I *love* it." Her voice was throaty and she ran it up and down its lower range. Nicky Hewett smiled and said, "Isn't Marcella pretty in her new costume?" as if to a class of schoolchildren, and scanned the theater. He was boyish-looking and mussed, wearing a rumpled corduroy jacket, and his voice was a deep rasp. "Is Tess Morgan here yet?" he asked.

"Darling, I don't know. I don't know the woman. Have you got a cigarette?" With her free hand she felt along his chest and into the pocket of his jacket and drew out the pack. He began to walk towards the stage, propelling her along with him, and she stumbled lightly, supported by his hand at her back.

"I'm dying, dying—cardboard is what this is, Nicky love. I forgot you didn't smoke actual *tobacco*." She shook out two cigarettes, grimacing, and put one in her mouth. "Any port in a storm," she said softly, and winked.

"Where's everyone?" Nicky asked, reaching the stage. An actor sitting in the second row, alone, saluted him and waved his script.

"Killing each other upstairs," Marcella offered, lazily following Nicky around the rim of the stage. "Final measurements today!" She leaned toward Nicky for a light, and he struck her a match.

"Like we need another late rehearsal. Get them down here, will you, Marcy? There's my girl." He sat down in the first row, in front of the actor, and opened the huge notebook which held script, blockings and notes.

"Et once, milord," Marcella answered, and climbed onto the stage. "Nicky!" she called, striking a pose stage center. "Won't this look heavenly in a blue light? 'Set your heart at rest! The fairyland buys not the child of me.'" She held the position a second; the tense lunging action of the legs, the outthrust, stiffened arm, the fierce facial expression and the dull white light conspired to make her look all of her thirty-six years, ridiculous in the pose. Getting no response from Nicky, she made a cat face at him, then smiled to show she was only joking, then exited backstage towards the costume room.

Nicky spoke to the actor but did not turn around: "Actually, I love babysitting this cast." He sighed. "I can't wait to see how this run-through goes."

"It'll be okay, don't worry about it. I even know my lines." He paused, adding in a voice full of conjecture, "Does it strike you that Marcella really *works* at acting like a drag queen?"

They laughed. "Exactly. I've done *Midsummer Night's Dream* twice before and never had an actress play Titania as a bitch."

The cast began to appear, noisy and laughing, from the costume room. Tess

Morgan stumbled among them. Too thin, and flustered by the exuberance of the younger actors, she was smiling uncomfortably and trying to manage the two cameras slung over her shoulder. Nicky called to her and watched, feeling strangely protective, as she picked her way through the actors to the front of the stage.

"Nicky! There you are!" she said, stooping down, her eyes shining with relief or recognition. He reached up and squeezed her hand. "I got a few shots while the costume girl was fitting them. It was a madhouse! How do I get down from here?"

"Steps stage left. Look at you smiling! You look great. Come sit with me, over there where my stuff is. I'll be right with you." He broke away from her and called for quiet. The cast settled down slowly, like animals. He began his speech.

"Okay. We'll be doing from Act III, Scene ii to the end of the show, the play within a play. We're going to try to make it twice through tonight, stopping once between for notes. I'll try not to interrupt you unless there's something really wrong. Please, *please* pay attention tonight to your entrances and cues. I sincerely hope you're all off book. If you're not in a scene, Janie's here to take final measurements, and I'd appreciate a little quiet today."

He motioned for Tess to stand. "This is Theresa Morgan, the photographer. You may have met her upstairs. She's working on a book about theater and for some reason, probably unrelated, is going to spend the next few weeks with us." Tess smiled professionally at the cast, who regarded her without comment. "Well, it's Thursday," Nicky continued. "We open two weeks from tomorrow night. We've got plenty of work ahead of us. Let's go." The cast scattered.

Nicky turned to Tess. "It's been too long," he said, embracing her quickly and patting her on the back. "Things ought to go pretty smoothly today, actually. You'll be able to get a good feel for the scenes."

"Well, for the first day I thought I'd just like to get familiar with the cast, learn my way around here, sort of." She glanced around at the actors taking their places. "How long have you been in Pittsburgh?" she asked Nicky.

"My fourth year. I didn't think I'd enjoy it at first, but it's got what I want. Hey, I really enjoyed your book, Tess. Didn't I tell you you'd hit it? Are you still teaching?"

"Yes, but I've got a leave for the fall term, for the new book. I found out the last time that working on both at once was torturous. Maybe not for someone *younger*—" she leaned over and poked him gently in the side—"but for me it would be pure masochism."

"You're hardly elderly."

"Forty-one!"

"Aah, the prime of life. Well, so long as you don't look it, right? And you don't. Excuse me." He shouted, "What's holding things up?"

"Nothing, nothing," said an actor, running onstage from off in the wings.

"Nicky," Tess whispered, "is someone free to show me around and all?"

"Yeah, sure. Alex," Nicky said, turning to the actor in the row behind him. "This is Tess Morgan. We used to teach at the same school. Introduce her

around, show her the theater and all while this scene is going on, would you?"

Tess turned, and Alex rose halfway from his seat to shake hands. He looked her evenly in the eyes and did not smile as Nicky said, "Alex Glenning, our Bottom; very, very talented young man." Tess nodded at him.

"I've wanted to meet you," Alex said, so seriously that Tess blushed.

"I'm very pleased to meet you," she said politely.

Nicky dismissed them, saying "Enjoy yourselves," and started the rehearsal. Alex motioned for Tess to join him at the far right aisle, where they could talk without bothering Nicky.

"Hello," he said when they were out of hearing, this time smiling, seeming much younger than before. He was taller than he had appeared, slumped into his seat, and his wide-mouthed grin discomposed the features of his face. Tess sensed that his facial expressions were easy and ambiguous.

"Is there anyone in particular you'd like to meet first?" he asked, and there was a charming awkwardness in his manner, as if he were overcoming a natural timidity. Tess immediately felt prim beside him.

"No, I don't think so," she said. "I *would* like, though, to get up a list of the cast and their parts. I've an awful memory." She took a notebook from her purse. "You read off the list of characters and tell me who plays what." She sat down in the front row and looked up, as if waiting for Alex to begin.

Obediently, slowly, he took the seat beside her, smiling as if privately amused.

"Dramatis Personae," he dictated, referring to his script.

"Theseus, Duke of Athens. He's sitting over there with the lady swathed in silver." Alex pointed at Marcella, who was sitting on the steps to the stage talking with a husky, bearded man. "Henry Baider," Alex said.

Tess wrote down the name. "Who's the woman with him?"

"No, no—out of order," Alex said, pointing to the script. "Next is Egeus, father to Hermia. I don't see him here. He must be in the costume room."

"Come on, who is she?" Tess asked again, impatient.

Alex sighed in mock disappointment. "We were going by the list. *That's* Marcella Moore, she plays Titania."

Tess noticed his tone and laughed. "Not your favorite person, I take it."

"Not my favorite person, no. Not in the top ten." He chuckled a little. "You get one in every cast."

"She's rather striking."

"No, no, she's old and scrawny, all wrong for Titania. And she's been hell all through the production—not for me, particularly, but for everyone else. I don't know why Nicky decided to cast her." He paused. "Uh, never mind—I do."

"Oh," said Tess, a second too late. Alex laughed. Tess ignored him.

They had worked almost halfway through the list when Marcella crossed over to them and waited in the seat next to Alex for a break in their conversation. Sensing a presence, Alex turned around.

"Hey, sailor, new in town?" Marcella was leaning against the folded seat, one toe wedged under her so the knee pointed out in a model's pose.

Alex turned to Tess. "Cancel my calls," he said, and lunged at Marcella who

laughed and pushed him away.

"Alex, you beast, be careful! It's my costume."

"Ah, yes," Alex said, and his eyes traced the rim of her plunging neckline. "Miss Morgan, this is Marcy Moore, she plays *Tit-ania*."

"Oooh," Marcella seethed, playing along. "I have a venturesome fairy that shall seek the squirrel's hoard and fetch *thee* new nuts!" She snatched at him, and her painted nails glittered.

"Subtext! Subtext!" Alex laughed, grabbing her by the wrists. "She plays dirty," he said to Tess.

Marcella shook her hair out of her face and rolled her eyes. "Whew! I just came to borrow your script. I'm cuing Henry."

"So that's it, eh?" He released her wrists with a push and tossed the script to her. "Take it! Take it and begone!"

Marcella picked it up and curtsied. "*Merci!*" She danced over to Henry with the script.

Alex turned to Tess. "Where were we?"

"Hippolyta," Tess said, adding in a low voice, "You're on awfully good terms with one of your least favorite people."

"Nah, just keeping her happy. I'm the one that's got to work with her." He took the pen and notebook from Tess. "Let's finish this and I'll take you around. Hippo-Lyta, the Amazon queen, a part brilliantly miscast to the fragile Mary Prine."

"Red hair?" Tess asked.

"Yeah."

"I got a picture of her earlier today," Tess said. "I was wondering which part she had."

"She's good, but she doesn't look like an Amazon to me," Alex said.

"Well, she's tall enough for one."

"That's true. But she's very dainty. Hardly a warrior."

Tess paused. "Maybe she and Marcella should trade parts, then," she said.

Alex turned and smiled, nodding slowly. "You're catching on," he told her.

Act III, Scene ii was long, and Tess and Alex had been in the balcony until just before it was time for his entrance. Tess stayed there alone to watch him act. On his head he wore two large, furry ears instead of the traditional ass head; and even as Bottom, Tess noticed he moved with a grace onstage he did not otherwise have. His changeability had puzzled her; it seemed to come to him naturally, without effort. So did his acting. He reminded her of someone, Tess thought.

For the second run-through, Tess sat next to Nicky and made notes to herself. She needed to call home and have Pam, the student who was housesitting for her, send her a few small items which she'd forgotten to pack. And there had been a message at the hotel to call her agent, Jim McMann, at his office; she hadn't had time to do that yet, though she suspected he had booked her a talk-show date to plug her last book, *Gossip*, which had been out nearly a year, and to promote the one she was working on at present, tentatively called *Cues*. He had been planning one for Chicago. There was a

third project—fifteen prints illustrating *Rumpelstiltskin* which had to be hand-painted with water colors; she could work on that in the afternoon.

She flipped a page in her notebook and read:

How about a cup of coffee after rehearsal?

Glancing around, she caught Alex's gaze. He was sitting alone at the other end of her row, watching for her. She smiled and tilted her head, lifting her eyebrows as if to ask, "Are you sure?"

Alex nodded.

Tess lowered her eyes, hesitated a moment, and nodded back.

It was a quarter to one when Tess and Alex stopped at a 24-hour coffee shop. Whatever tiredness they had vanished in the night air which was as cool as a shadow, and delicate.

"It's going to hit me tomorrow," Tess said as they went inside. "Traveling all day yesterday, now this, and tomorrow at eleven I get to inspect the darkroom I'll be using. What time is rehearsal?"

"Seven. Don't think about tomorrow, you'll make yourself sleepy."

"And I shot a roll of film I'll have to develop."

Alex slid into a booth. "Don't you ever think about anything besides your work?"

"Not if I can help it." He could take that whichever way he liked.

"Tell me about it, then."

"Oh, well, there's really nothing to tell until the pictures come out. I want it to deal with the theater—actors, crew people, audiences, all phases of production. I'm hoping there'll be a dichotomy between the real and the make-believe that will show up in the finished collection. Then I want to caption them with quotations from plays."

"Like the captions in *Gossip*?"

"Sort of." A girl in grayish-white came to take their orders. When she left, Tess said, "I didn't know you were familiar with *Gossip*."

"Of course. What, did you think I was kidding when I said I'd wanted to meet you?"

She shrugged. "It's something to say."

"I got it for Christmas. Actually, it's kind of embarrassing. An old girlfriend gave me the book because she said there was someone like me in it."

Tess ran over the pictures in her mind, giving up finally, puzzled. "Which?"

He chuckled and said, "I'm glad you can't guess. It was 'Steve'."

The photograph called "Steve" centered on a young man flanked by two friends on a downtown street. In the foreground, blurred, a young girl walked towards the camera, her face anonymous. The boys were grinning, speaking to the one in the center, swaggering in adolescent confidence; yet in the caption a gossiping girl told a friend that "Steve" was forever begging her to "do it," but that she could always manage to shoot him down; he believed anything.

Tess struggled against a smile. "No! A girlfriend gave that to you?"

"Oh, she was kidding. She knew it wasn't true! She was after the look on his face, the attitude—you know, 'Actors are never serious, they only think of themselves, they're always on stage,' and so on. Well, I'll tell you—not since Marcella Moore have I met such a megalomaniac." He paused while the waitress brought him a cup of coffee, and a glass of orange juice for Tess.

"Can you sleep after drinking that?" Tess asked.

"This? Doesn't bother me. But I don't sleep much anyway—four or five hours a night. Like tonight I'll probably put in an hour or so on my lines." The clumsy waitress moved slowly away, and Alex continued. "Anyway, she was really full of herself. She ended up calling it quits with me a couple weeks later."

Tess awkwardly said, "Well, I know that's hard."

"Well, everyone goes through it, right?"

"That's right. And," she added, choosing words carefully, for this was something she lived by, "think of how fortunate you are to have an art, acting, which is important to you. So many people have no place for their feelings or their energies when they lose a love, but people like you and me can always put our energies into our work, or make it a substitute for what's lost."

Alex considered this, then shook his head. "But acting is only important because I make it important, I put everything I can into it. The other is important in spite of what I feel about it." He sipped coffee. "I couldn't make acting mean everything to me."

"You could if you needed to," Tess said. "You could if you thought you'd never want anything else. I felt that way when I was just a little younger than you. A man left me and I thought that was the end of the world, but I went off and became a photographer's assistant in New York, and then a photographer myself. I did little documentaries for magazines. I traveled, I developed my technique, and I've been pretty successful. My imagination's stronger now than it was twenty years ago. And every time I shut myself up in the darkroom and watch the images rise up out of the paper, I feel good. I'm comfortable with that."

"Well, you're obviously much stronger than I am," Alex responded. "Or else—well, it could be a number of things. Your work could be more sustaining than mine. You could be much better at photography than I am at acting. Or whatever happened to you when you were my age"—he smiled at the phrase—"was much worse than what I went through."

Tess said nothing.

"Or you could just be too sensitive."

"I've thought of that," Tess said. She shifted her position. "Of course, everyone takes things differently."

At ten o'clock Friday morning, Tess got around to making her first calls—to McMann, who wasn't in, and to Pam, whose high-pitched, distant voice made Tess feel as though Pam were talking from the past; the words they spoke seemed dated and irrelevant. Still, Tess lingered over the call.

She showered and dressed quickly, and gathering together cameras and film and notebooks and lenses, sorted through for what she wanted to take.

Basic equipment—film, lenses, and light meter—she stored in the zippered and buttoned pockets of the short-sleeved khaki jacket she habitually wore while working. Notebooks and folders for the proofs and negatives, along with the *Rumpelstiltskin* prints and a set of paints, she dumped into a bulky carryall; she wore the cameras on her shoulder. Then, running late, she hurried downstairs to the lobby.

Alex was waiting there, looking almost shamefaced with his wide grin.

"I heard you needed a driver," he said.

"Oh, hello." Tess paused in her rush a moment. "I'm afraid I can't talk, I'm about to be late for an appointment." She smiled and turned away to go on, but he stopped her and took the carryall from her, talking as he led her outside.

"You don't know Pittsburgh like I do," he said. "We wouldn't want you getting lost. Even if you have directions, they're probably wrong. Where are you headed?"

She told him. "I'm supposed to meet Don Baer, who teaches photography at the university, and pick up some keys from him."

"And then what?"

They reached the car and he opened the door for her ostentatiously.

"Then I'm going to print a roll of film," she said; seeing him waiting, she sighed and smiled, took the carryall from him, and got into the car. Alex went around to his own side and climbed in.

"You don't mind my coming along," he said; it wasn't a question at all.

"Of course not," answered Tess.

The formalities of meeting Baer at the University and of receiving the darkroom keys from him were over, and Tess settled into familiarizing herself with the darkroom. It seemed to Alex as though she changed, in the way that mothers past the age of bearing change when an infant is brought into the room. She seemed to soften and relax, becoming visibly more at ease than he had seen her. Leaning against the wall, hands sunk in the pockets of his nondescript beige trousers, he watched and grinned as she mixed solutions and filled tanks. Tess spoke infrequently, brief statements ("I'm turning the light out now") or low, rhythmic counting by thousands. It seemed only a short while before she hung the film to dry and turned to Alex.

"You must be bored to death," she said.

"Not at all," he said, but could not have explained his answer.

"Well, we've got some time to kill—want to get some lunch?"

Alex nodded, and Tess locked up, taking the carryall with her for safekeeping.

"So—what are you doing for the rest of the summer?" she asked, trying in her way to compensate for dominating the morning by transferring the topic of conversation to Alex.

"Just one other show, in August," he said, "*Arms and the Man*. I play, of course, the chocolate-cream soldier. The rest of the time I just work for the theater, doing publicity mostly, a little set work. How about yourself?"

Tess rattled off her itinerary. "From here to Chicago, for two weeks, then Minneapolis, Kansas City, Dallas, Denver, Salt Lake City and San Francisco—

I think that's it. It's a hair-raising schedule. I'll get back to Virginia early to mid-September, and I'll have from then until December to do most of the work on the book. Which won't be nearly enough time!" she laughed lightly. "And I'm supposed to finish a set of prints for a children's book by June 15th in the meantime, although the major work on that is finished."

"Another book?"

She smiled as if she were not used to talking about it. "Yes, oh, but different. It's *Rumpelstiltskin*. I'll show you the prints later, if you like; I've got them right here. Oh," she said suddenly, "but we ought not to talk so much about photography after this morning."

"Don't be silly," Alex said. "I'd like to see how this collection would differ from *Gossip*."

"It's completely different, completely—in *Gossip* I used a more journalistic type of photography, completely different from this book."

They found a restaurant and entered; and after they had ordered, Tess fumbled in the carryall for the notebook of prints.

"Here," she said, handing the portfolio to Alex.

It had only fifteen prints inside, each cased in plastic, and Alex was struck by the pictures. They were fantastic, unreal. Tess had painted over the black and white photos with water colors, making them look stiff and flat; yet she had found an eerie beauty in her models which came through in the photography. Alex stopped at a picture of the young girl in the room full of gold, turning as if dancing, her hair in a soft spiral, her face forward showing pleasure and astonishment. Surrounding her was the room of gold, like a cloud or glow around her.

"Beautiful," he said quietly. In other pictures *Rumpelstiltskin*—a child of about twelve with a strangely grown-up look—cowered in the dark, his impish face demanding the first-born of the young queen; the girl spun at a wheel while her father boasted to the king; some landscapes were blurred to give the impression of a memory or a dream, while faces stood out in painful clarity, surely real. Three of the prints remained unpainted.

"I wouldn't have known you could do work like this," Alex told her.

"It was fun," Tess responded. "I did a lot of experimentation with lighting and developing, going for these effects." She took the notebook back from him. "I've agreed to do a series of them—next *Sleeping Beauty* and *Hansel and Gretel*. But not until next year."

"After the theater book."

"Right."

Their meals came and they ate, chatting about the books and photography in general until, as they were finishing, Alex said, "I can't believe how different you are now from the way you were last night."

"I'm not different," Tess said, smiling. "I'm just talking about things I know." She looked at him. "Aren't you happiest doing what you do best?"

"Happiest?"

"Happiest, most comfortable."

He considered this. "I can't say, really, that I'm happy acting. I'm happy when I've *finished* a scene or a play, applause and all that, but not so much

during. It's a constant proving ground—you have to concentrate so much of the time that you don't bother about your own feelings." He would ordinarily have gone on, except for Tess' confirming look, her knowing; her delight in his knowing.

"But that's the way work is for everyone, particularly artists. Of course, some of us get to the point at which our feelings depend upon our work, and everything else becomes secondary. Then, I think you find happiness even in the smallest parts."

Alex looked at her across the table, the bright eyes in the trim middle-aged face talking about a happiness which seemed suddenly lonely and false to him. He saddened because she so obviously believed what she was saying, and he felt in some way protective, too, so that when they had paid and left and were heading back to campus, he slipped his arm around her and pulled her closer to him. She stiffened a little in surprise.

"Alex—don't," she said seriously, deeply embarrassed. She saw at once the picture they made, an older woman with a young and handsome man, and thought first that Alex must be teasing her as he had teased Marcella the night before.

"Tess," he said slowly, "I like you, and this isn't an act I'm putting on."

And though she doubted this and wondered how or why it had happened, Tess walked with him back to the darkroom like that, never quite relaxed, yet not tense.

Tess insisted upon making the contact sheets, so Alex had to talk to her in the pauses between her periods of concentration.

"It sounds the way you tell it as if people are more interested in your books than in you," he said.

"Oh, well, it's not quite that desperate," Tess answered. "But I've never been much interested in them. See," she said, snipping the film at intervals, "I'm one of your basically nice people, there's a lot of mothering in me. Consequently, I tend to attract a lot of losers who need that kind of attention. I don't have the time." She was carefully labelling and recording numbers on the film.

"So you kept to yourself? How, all that time?"

She didn't look up. "You just do it, and forget."

"It's sad." Alex watched her fitting the film into the printing frame, lining up the strips.

"I'm turning off the lights," Tess said, and in a moment Alex saw her in the orange-red glow of the safelight. "I hate for you to have gone through that loneliness," he said.

"You don't get lonely unless you think about yourself all the time. I don't think so much about myself," Tess said, "and I *hate* talking about myself."

Alex grinned behind her. "Then how do people get to know you?"

"I can't believe they want to."

"Tess, believe it."

She turned on the bright lamp for exposing the prints and startled him. But she said nothing.

She went about the process in silence, and Alex watched for what seemed to be a long time. Then he said, "Tell me about what made you like your work better than people."

"I should just tell you to go to hell," she said. "Do you know how long it's been since I even thought about it? A *long* time." And she walked from one area to another in the strange orange glow, talking in a tone which suggested an old tale which did not interest her much, and working steadily. "It was Tommy Bailey. He was a musician, he played the piano. Excellently. Any style you could name. I met him when I was seventeen or eighteen and was absolutely in awe of him. We were together about two years when he decided to move up to New York—we grew up in Virginia. It was winter and we left three weeks before Christmas, 1955; my mother still hasn't forgiven me. Well, in about a month he had found some other girl to live with, although I didn't know it at the time, and he gave me a story that I was just not creative or free enough for him, and he couldn't work with me around—he was getting out for the sake of his talent. He said he was ruining himself for me, and that I was ruining myself by leaving Virginia. Then he gave me a hundred dollars that he had saved for me to go home on. Well, I couldn't exactly go home, having become the family disgrace. So I went to stay with a girl I'd met at one of the places that had hired Tommy for a couple of nights, and that's when I got the job with the photographer—he was her brother. I started out just modeling, and I stretched that hundred dollars forever, it seemed. But I made it.

"I used to wish I could see him again," Tess went on, "but I'm glad I never did. He never made it as big as he hoped; he wanted to be a household word, and he must have gotten awfully bitter. I couldn't help thinking, when *Gossip* hit the best-seller lists, how funny it was that I'd never been 'creative' enough for Tommy, but there I was, and where was he?"

"Like revenge," Alex said.

"Sort of. But not as direct." She sighed. "I always thought that if I told about it, it would upset me, but it hasn't," she said. "Anyway, I haven't been tempted to trust anyone since. I didn't find out about the other woman for about six months.

"I hadn't ever told him I'd left the city, and I thought it would be fun, when I got the assistant's job at the studio, to tell Tommy what I'd done and surprise him. But on the day I went to his old apartment I saw him coming out with this girl, and he was talking with her, holding her so carelessly, as if—as if it were *right*. But I thought it couldn't be much—he really had loved me, and for so long, he'd probably just gotten lonesome or something, or had tried to find me in Virginia but couldn't. So a couple days later I called him and she answered the phone. I asked to speak to Mr. Bailey, and she said, 'Mr. Bailey isn't home right now, but this is Mrs. Bailey, maybe I could help you?' So I just said, 'No, thanks,' and hung up. I felt awful." Her voice had become low, small and dry.

What strange persistence caused an experience to become part of one, Tess wondered; a persistence not the same as memory—less definite, but more pervasive. Only now did she *remember*, and what she remembered were details: she had heard behind her on that slow, lonesome walk home, a liquid rustling sound that quickly mounted to a roar, as if a house in the block had abruptly

exploded into flame. But what she saw when she turned was a little squad of children, laughing, careering toward her on roller skates—it was the rush of their skates on the pavement that made that astonishing fire-sound. As they split into two ranks and streaked past her she felt herself engulfed in phantom flame, in fire devoid of heat or light. It was a terrifying feeling, but somehow satisfying; peculiar to that day and never heard again. She had not thought of it for years; but at the same time there had not been a day since then that she had not heard the word 'love' and mentally paired it with 'rejection'.

Alex said, after a long while, "Maybe if you've only been in love once, if you've only had one kind of love, you measure everything by that."

"I don't doubt it," Tess said.

"Not everyone is like he was."

"I should hope not."

Alex came up behind her and circled her waist with his arms. "Tess," he said.

"Wait," she answered, fixing the sheet in the print washer. She turned on the water and adjusted its temperature. She set the timer for forty-five minutes.

"Now," she said, turning around.

The shudder and drip of the air conditioner woke Tess from a pleasant, baffling dream. The air smelled damp; crazy for summer. She eased out of bed and crept to turn off the unit with smooth movements that would not wake Alex, although the machine's knock and hiss and sudden silence threatened his sleep more than she. Then, chilly from having stood in front of the draught, she fetched her robe. And then she was awake and thirsty and reluctant to sleep again.

In the dark she stumbled to the bathroom and closed herself inside, wincing at the abrupt whiteness. She did not know what time it was. The mirror reflected back a scowling, small-eyed disheveled head.

Good God.

She soaked a washcloth in cold water and patted it over her face; she pinched her cheekbones roughly, coaxing color. What a thin face, she thought as she gazed at it sleepily—Poor skinny face. Poor face with this hair for a mane. She fluffed and patted her hair into a shape: better. Go back to sleep and muss it up. Tess rubbed her arms through the robe. Skinny arms, too. Poor arms, that only looked young in sleeves. She laughed to herself. Well, then: poor body! She sprayed on some cologne and stared into the mirror.

Shit.

She turned out the light in disgust, but turned it on again to fill a glass of water. It tasted warm and metallic.

In the room again, Tess waited for her sight to adjust to the darkness. She could make out the two beds, Alex heaped sleeping in theirs, and moved towards the other, intending just to stretch out; but once she lay down, she curled up like a fist and smiled. One of Alex's oversized feet hung over the side of the bed, a clownish foot broad as a paddle; Tess must have come close to hitting it when she passed. It twitched as he dreamed.

The whole scene seemed funny to Tess. I'm not old, she reminded herself

(as she had several times that day)—he's just younger. So young, sprawled like a baby belly-down in the next bed, his huge feet and hands everywhere. At least now he isn't confusing, switching accents and roles every two breaths. "I love you, Tess." "I wish I had known you earlier, Tess, when you needed me the way I need you now."

Lines—it wasn't only actors. Well. And why had she told him that old story, when for years it had been practically forgotten? It didn't matter, probably, being old. But was sad remembering. Well, she could go back to Virginia and say, "In Pittsburgh I had a young lover." It was more likely, though, she'd say nothing at all. Silly even to think about it.

She yawned, stretched and got up to crawl back into bed with Alex, and a bit of doggerel came into her head:

*She plays knick-knack on my thumb
With a knick-knack, paddywhack
Give your dog a bone
This old maid goes rolling home.*

Which puzzled her a minute—"this old *man*," of course. She laughed in a whisper at her own mistake, and either the laugh or the weight of her body entering the bed woke Alex, who rolled over and murmured her name and swung his arm out so she could lie there, held close and pillowed on his shoulder.

A bad final dress rehearsal, so the superstition goes, means a good opening night. There were so many technical problems the night before opening that no one paid attention to the acting. Tess stayed backstage, shooting the tech crew and costumed actors as they worked on problems; she no longer bothered them as a photographer, and worked unnoticed. Alex and some of the other actors paced nervously, talking little so as to avoid breaking concentration. Marcella chain-smoked and swore in whispers offstage because the fog-making machine used in some of her scenes had roared and sputtered over her lines in Act II. And Nicky made cynical jokes whenever an interruption occurred, so that everyone felt vaguely responsible for his black mood.

The tech crew would have to stay well into the morning fixing the set, but Nicky dismissed the actors at eleven. "Rest up," he told them. "The show looks good as far as you're concerned, although admittedly tonight you looked like you were on automatic pilot. It'll go better with an audience. We'll have a good house tomorrow. In fact, as of now it's almost a sellout. Well, like I said, get lots of rest, and we'll see you tomorrow around six."

Alex, sweaty and exhausted, wiped makeup off with Kleenex and managed to grin at Tess.

"Did you watch?"

"No, too much going on backstage. I got another roll of just tech problems."

"You will watch tomorrow, though."

"Oh yes, of course—wouldn't miss it."

"It's strange that you've never seen me act," he said, and crushing the tissue into a wad, he stood.

"Ham," said Tess, and she stood too, and stroked his forehead. "I've watched you rehearse."

"No comparison," he said. "You'll see."

In two weeks they had reached a point of awkwardness in which they knew each other in some respects so intimately that each could predict the other's wishes; yet in some situations they were reduced to embarrassing small talk, or else found themselves merely dumb and uncomfortable. Tess constantly suspected herself of foolishness, imagining the comments of people who saw her with Alex (she's so much older than he is; she probably even thinks he loves her, but he's obviously after her money; she's acting out her adolescence); sometimes she was sure they were the truth she was hiding from herself whenever she was happy with him.

She had developed and catalogued fourteen rolls of film since her arrival, and except for the first roll, had printed no proof sheets; nor had she worked on *Rumpelstiltskin*. In the mornings she would drive to the darkroom and carefully develop the film before Alex was awake—for the first time there were other plans, other diversions. The woman who for twenty years had been devoted to photography had become, with the merest of coaching, the Tess of nineteen, who was content to plan life around a present happiness. She had not regretted the years before she met Alex and had not expected to change the routines of her life so easily. Now, driving back to the hotel with him, she shuddered a little remembering the work she had let stand and the thought of what she had perhaps neglected to do at the same time.

Alex walked her to her room—escorted her everywhere, in fact—with the air of someone who performs an expected but unfamiliar gesture; in all, guarding her in the way grandparents guard a child who has been mistreated and fears everything. Tess was aware of this, as she was aware of his deference towards her, his never questioning her moods or actions, and did not know whether to be grateful, resentful, or amused. As a result, she behaved the way she always did with Alex, smiling and acknowledging deeds prompted, as they were, from love of her.

She had done one thing herself that was out of character: she cancelled, two days before, a week of work in Chicago in order to stay with Alex, something she felt uncomfortable about; she had acted on impulse. Alex had made tentative plans on his part to join Tess later in the summer before his final show went into rehearsal, but Tess doubted whether he would be able to free himself from his theater duties. The present, however, was too good not to take advantage of, and they made love that night, as on the nights before, as though they believed they would never have another chance.

Midway through the opening, Tess noticed her own queasiness. It was a subtle nausea which had been growing all day and which Tess had refused to acknowledge. She glanced at Nicky, who sat beside her, pleased and tired; the performance was going well and he was beginning to unwind. She smiled and gently squeezed his hand. Act III, Scene ii was drawing to an end, and the last

scenes were Alex's showcase.

He was excellent, of course, and the audience fell into each slapstick trick and Elizabethan pun effortlessly. Alex timed himself to them instinctively, and they were his. At the curtain call, Tess saw from the audience his pride, and the exhilaration which he had said accompanied the finished performance. She was happy for him; yet the sick feeling persisted.

Nicky clutched her hand and led her backstage. Amid the flowers and champagne and makeup and sweating extras, they found Alex and hugged him; Tess beamed as he washed and changed and told her about the small failures and triumphs of his evening. Someone handed her a glass of champagne to Tess, a sip of which made her stomach leap. Nicky left to get ready for the cast party, which he was hosting, and everything was noisy and confusing.

"Alex, I'm sick," Tess said, and as if on cue, she was suddenly pale and shaky. Alex broke off his excitement and became concerned at once. "Would you mind if..."

"No, no," Alex interrupted, "We'll go straight to the hotel."

Outside, Tess tried breathing deeply and felt a little better.

"What is it?" Alex asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "I feel queasy. I just want to lie down for awhile."

"I'll have to put in an appearance at the party," Alex said. "I have the cast's gift for Nicky. But I'll leave as soon as I can get away and come back."

"Oh, Alex, that's so sweet, but don't," Tess said in a weak voice. "I'll most likely go right to sleep."

He tried to insist, but could not against her wan smile.

She lay quietly in the dark, and could not sleep.

After a long while she rolled over and sat on the edge of the bed and groped for the phone. The hotel operator answered; Tess asked for the time and the number of the airport. It was 2:15.

The operator connected her with the airport. Tess made a reservation for the 7:45 a.m. flight out of Pittsburgh for Chicago, not letting herself doubt that she was doing the right thing. Then, tired but moving with a steady force, she packed neatly and arranged her equipment in cases and boxes. There was not really much at all. She felt peculiar as she stored the negatives from the fourteen rolls of film—nearly 500 shots—not knowing quite how any of them had turned out.

There would have been no excuse to stay with Alex, when at her age she could offer him nothing. Why had he been so persistent with her, showing her such kindness and tenderness? Tess asked herself that, and had for two weeks, and now knew: it was pity, only a cheap pity for some loss he knew she had suffered. At about four o'clock in the morning, Tess cried as she showered, the angry tears melting under the spray, and she looked in her memory for things he had done which might save him.

Later, she dressed and was calm again. At the snack shop downstairs she drank coffee and ate soft toast, speculating as she glanced at the previous day's

paper what Alex's reaction would be; convincing herself that it didn't matter. Let me be like I was before, she thought to herself. Saying it that way, like a prayer, made Tess believe it could happen, that she could change somehow, back into her old self. Let it happen, she thought.

When the limousine arrived at 6:15, Tess was ready, her baggage stacked in the lobby. In her professional, aloof manner she instructed the driver on the care of the equipment as he loaded it into the baggage rack. She was slipping back into it; and how easy it was, like hypnosis. She tried to imagine what word could have been the hypnotic suggestion which had triggered her back into the trance, what look or action could have made her aware once more of her dignity. For the first time she noticed her own tense smile as she gave it to the driver when he helped her into the car, and knew it from the faces of other women; recognized its message.

How much have I lost, she thought; how much has been given back to me? Yet even as she mused, her old self took hold in the cold blue dawn in the old car rambling away: don't even think about it. Alex would sleep until ten, maybe; by eight o'clock—nine o'clock here—Tess would be in Chicago. She planned what she would do: first, get to the hotel, check in, call Pam at home. Call McMann in New York and explain everything. Find out when the darkroom he'd arranged for would be available, and how to get there. Call the theater and find out the rehearsal time. Then, maybe, a nap. I've been tired so long, she thought, resting her head against the cool window. Thank God it's a short flight.



Lear and Gloucester

Ignorant old men to
trust those offspring that suckled
against dear breasts now gone
because the blood that trickled
through their veins was your own—
you are your children's cuckolds.

Familiar things are dead,
and you dying must grapple
with small hands you once held
firmly, when they were feeble:
with confidence you fed
cannibals at your table.

Of those wits that contained
such undivided splendor
some vestiges remain,
like old bruises, still tender,
only to be inflamed
again at your surrender.

And those eyes which were big
as with children now go blind,
boiled like eggs, wrapped in rags,
soft white swallowing a fine
yolk blue as robin's egg
pierced with a fork's frail tines.

To my Love, who desired that I would dance with her

These present-day distractions try
the patience of an introspective man
lost in the recreation of a time
that danced the stately, elegant pavane
to music that was spinning in the sky,
hidden behind the shadow of a fan.
The transmigration of some primitive
soul is behind the tapping of your feet—
the ecstasies of mystery, that leave
unconscious horses straining at the bit.
And yet the outcome is mechanical:
rhythm is also made by cogs and wheels
and that most regular machine we call
the heart, that beats, but neither breaks nor feels.
Your body is an earth-bound bit of clay,
and these translations of the stars and sky
require a different medium to frame
immortal things that neither live nor die.
Love, you are nothing like a swan. Your arms
are without feathers, and your voice is sweet
in all its songs. Perusal now confirms
there is no rubbery webbing on your feet.
There is a kind of ordinary fool
who can believe the music of the heart.
Let us leave dancing to that simple soul:
I know another graceful, moving art.



JUNE '11

Contributors' Notes

James Applewhite, Duke's poet-in-residence, has just completed a long autobiographical poem entitled *Compass for the Flood*.

Jay Bonner is a Trinity College sophomore.

William Brown, president of the English Majors Association and a copy editor for *Tobacco Road*, has studied poetry with George Packard, Helen Bevington, James Applewhite, and Betty Adcock.

Julie Deal is a senior from Houston, Texas.

Dana Donovan, a junior from Weston, Mass., is majoring in English.

Virginia Franke is a senior history and economics major from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Edward Gomez, a Trinity College junior, is the newly-elected chairman of Freewater Film Society.

Anne Gregory is a senior majoring in English and studio art.

Sandy Hingston, a senior in Trinity College, won the 1977 Anne Flexner Award.

Robin Johnson is a sophomore in Trinity College.

Jacqueline Kazarian is a freshman from Lake Bluff, Illinois.

Dusty Knight is a Trinity College sophomore from New Hampshire.

Susan Lieberman, a Trinity College senior, is arts editor of *The Chronicle* and prose editor of *The Archive*.

Megan Matchinske, a junior from California, is majoring in art and English.

Robert Meece is a senior studying biomedical engineering.

Anne Morris edits *Tobacco Road* and spends a great deal of time dancing.

John Ray, a senior from Florida, is studying German.

Herman Salinger, a retired professor of German, contributes frequently to *The Archive*.

Haun Saussy is a freshman Greek major from Nashville.

Lisa Schick, a Trinity College sophomore from New Jersey, is art editor of *The Archive*.

Mitzie Seaton is a junior from Barrington, Illinois majoring in design.

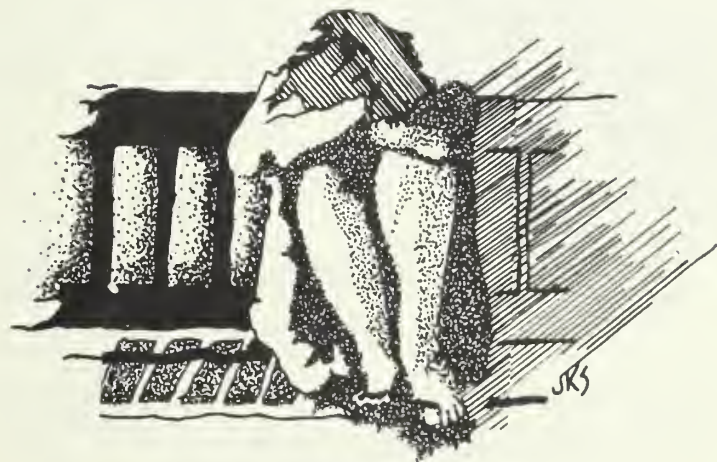
Janet Holmes Stanford is a 1976 graduate of Duke.

Mike Stanford is a senior English major.

Cheryl Stiles is a sophomore from Atlanta.

Betty Wolfe is an employee of Duke Hospital.

Amy Zlotsky is a junior from Tolland, Connecticut.





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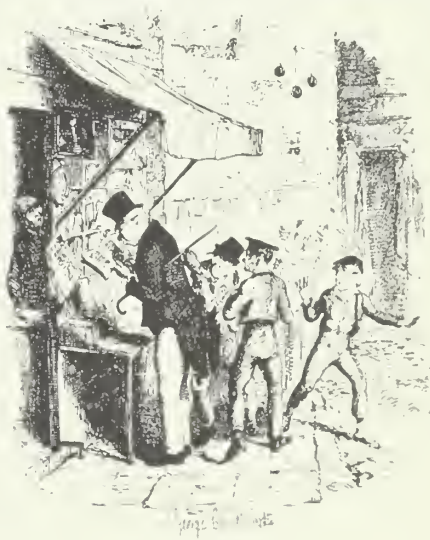


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